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### Three Women in the Fourth Gospel

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GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY  
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*Three Women in the Fourth Gospel*

Thesis for Master of Arts in Theology  
Bible/New Testament

Submitted to  
Dr. Tom Johnson  
Dr. Kent Yinger

BY

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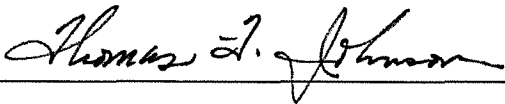
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Title: Three Women in the Fourth Gospel

Presented by: Debbie Lamm Bray

We, the undersigned, certify that we have read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree of Master of Arts in Theological Studies.



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## Introduction

New Testament theologians grapple with many issues that have significance for both biblical interpretation and practical Christian living. Of these issues, questions of the role of women in Scripture and particularly in the life and ministry of Jesus have held center stage often in recent scholarship. This question drives us to examine the Gospels for pericopes in which Jesus interacts with women, to identify key passages that impact our understanding of the biblical place of women within the life of the church.

In John, three particular passages stand out: John 4, in which Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well; John 11, in which Martha speaks with Jesus prior to Jesus' resurrecting their brother Lazarus; and John 20, in which the risen Jesus meets a distraught Mary Magdalene at his empty tomb.<sup>1</sup> These passages share common structures and themes. Insightful patterns emerge, giving us insight into the relationship of Jesus to those who believe in him as Messiah.

We will begin with an examination of the background of John, including introductory matters, the community of John, the Gospel's historicity, and the theology of John. We will examine the social and historical background, as well as the literary and critical issues of each text. We will then draw conclusions for the church today.

Many scholars have spent their life work deep in the trenches with the Johannine literature. Rudolph Bultmann's theories of sources,<sup>2</sup> C. K. Barrett's careful examination

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<sup>1</sup>Selection of these passages is from a survey of all Gospel material in which Jesus has verbal interactions with women. These three contain particularly long and developed conversations, which appeared to provide opportunity to analyze the interactions and determine the way in which Jesus is presented in relationship to women.

<sup>2</sup> Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971).

of the text and background issues<sup>3</sup> and Raymond Brown's plethora of writings on this Gospel and the community from which it arose<sup>4</sup> provide a rich well from which to draw insight. Current writers such as Marianne Meye Thompson<sup>5</sup> keep the scholarship alive and fresh. We will utilize this wealth of existing research in this examination of the Gospel.

Important works on the historical background of the first and second century church and its environment will also play a major role in this study. James S. Jeffers,<sup>6</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson,<sup>7</sup> Everett Ferguson<sup>8</sup> and others provide deep insight into the historical and social context of early Christians such as John's community of believers. Karen Jo Torjeson,<sup>9</sup> D. M. Scholer<sup>10</sup> and many others have contributed to our understanding of the context in which early Christian women lived their faith in Christ.

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<sup>3</sup>C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978).

<sup>4</sup>Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1996). See also his other works, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979); and *The Gospel According to John, A and B* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966 and 1970).

<sup>5</sup>Marianne Meye Thompson, *The Incarnate Word: Perspectives on Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993) and "John, Gospel of", in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 368-383.

<sup>6</sup>James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

<sup>7</sup>Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, rev. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup>Everett J. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987, 1993).

<sup>9</sup>Karen Jo Torjeson, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993; HarperCollins, 1995).

<sup>10</sup>D. M. Scholer, "Women," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 880-886.

Commentators like Brown, Barrett and C. H. Dodd<sup>11</sup> help us understand specific passages and the questions surrounding them. We will hear from this wide body of scholarship, with many voices and perspectives, and will interact with the biblical texts themselves. We will note parallels and uniquenesses among our key passages, and draw conclusions from them in the company of all these witnesses.

For the purpose of clarity, the term “author” and the pronoun “he” (when used of the author) shall refer to the person or people who wrote and/or developed the Gospel of John. This does not indicate a supposition that the author is an individual male.

This study will lead us to view the three passages as setting a precedent for the full involvement of women in the life and mission of the church.

This subject and the proposed thesis must be approached with caution, recognizing that many people using careful scholarship and coming from honest motivations can draw varying conclusions from any given text. As Rensberger so aptly said,

. . . I regard this undertaking as experimental and exploratory. Experiments can certainly fail and exploration can lead nowhere; but even so, the enterprise should at least make clear to us something of what is possible in this area, and perhaps something of what is impossible as well.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963).

<sup>12</sup>Rensberger, 107.



## **Chapter 1**

### **Background of the Fourth Gospel**

#### **Introductory Matters**

##### Author, Date and Place of Writing

Many theories have been presented regarding the authorship of the Fourth Gospel. Questions have been raised regarding whether the writer's name must be John, and if so, which John it might be. A basic understanding of the authorship and intended audience is necessary in order to place the Gospel in its original context and grasp at least part of the author's intended meaning.

Two specific theories call for review here. Many have suggested, beginning with Clement of Alexandria, that the author was John, son of Zebedee, one of the Twelve. Thompson has argued convincingly that the son of Zebedee is not a logical choice, for several reasons. First, the external evidence is not clear, including Irenaeus' reference from the second century C.E. Secondly, the "legend" of his authorship includes that he wrote it from Ephesus, and there is no evidence in Ephesus suggesting that John son of Zebedee wrote from there. Third, Clement of Alexandria's assertion that John son of Zebedee wrote the Gospel is not based on evidence, and therefore (in Thompson's view) seems to be more legendary than factual. Finally, the internal evidence in the Gospel itself is unclear regarding authorship, and the content suggests to many that it was not written by an eyewitness.<sup>1</sup>

Thompson asks further whether 21:20, 24 require that the Beloved Disciple wrote the Gospel and that this person was John son of Zebedee? It is commonly held by

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<sup>1</sup>Thompson, "John," 369.

scholars that the Beloved Disciple “heard and followed Jesus, although he was not one of the Twelve. . . . [Rather,] [o]ne (or more) of his [the Beloved Disciple’s] disciples wrote the Gospel.”<sup>2</sup>

If it was written by a disciple or several followers of the Beloved Disciple, most scholars say it was written after 70 C.E., even as late as 85.<sup>3</sup> Some scholars still say that it was written from Ephesus, but some say it came from Palestine and then its final shape came from somewhere in the Diaspora.<sup>4</sup> Although the identity of the author remains unresolved, the inclusion of the Fourth Gospel in the canon attests to its value even with its ambiguities.

### Sources

There is general agreement that there is at least one source behind John’s Gospel. Bultmann introduced the idea of a “signs source” from which the miracle material in chapters 2-11 was taken.<sup>5</sup>

The source theories have developed into a theory that several sources were used. Burkett points out that there are repetitions in John, even within a specific sign story:

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid, 370. See also Colleen M. Conway, *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel*, SBL Dissertation Series 167 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 65. Conway notes that Schussler Fiorenza, Scott and Kysar have asserted that the characterization of women in John’s Gospel could indicate a female author of the Gospel. See also Sandra M. Schneiders, “Women in the Fourth Gospel and the Role of Women in the Contemporary Church,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 12 (1982), 38. Schneiders makes a good case for the influence of women in the shaping of this gospel, although she doesn’t specifically assert a possibility of female authorship. There does not seem to be sufficient evidence to support a conclusion regarding the gender of the author, although the unlikelihood of widespread circulation of a Gospel written by a woman within a patriarchal culture would provide a reason for the elusiveness of the identity of the final author and the credit being given to one named “John.”

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 371.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>David Rensberger, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 18.

Jesus hears of Lazarus' illness in both 11: 4 and 11:6. He believes this points to a use of two sources, each one fragmented.<sup>6</sup>

The discourses of Jesus included in the Fourth Gospel often include sayings that are very close to sayings in the Synoptics (John 6 and Mark 14:22; John 13-17 recalls Mark 10:45; John 13:14, 34; 14:15; 15:12, 17 relate to Mark 12:31).<sup>7</sup> While these "sayings" are never explicitly quoted, they are often easily identified.<sup>8</sup> This may indicate that John used a sayings source similar to that used by synoptic writers.

R. E. Brown has developed an approach adopted by many others. He holds that memories of Jesus, different from the ones recorded in the Synoptics, were influenced by the experiences of the Johannine community, which preserved and preached them. Then an evangelist, perhaps creatively, wrote them down.<sup>9</sup>

The prominence of the signs source theory and the possibility of additional sources give insight into textual difficulties such as noted above regarding John 4.

There is debate over whether the author of the Fourth Gospel used Mark's Gospel as a source. Barrett discusses this debate thoroughly. He concludes that the Fourth Gospel does not show enough evidence to presume use of Mark as a source, although they may have used similar sources and the author of John may have read Luke.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Delbert Burkett "Two Accounts of Lazarus' Resurrection in John 11," *Novum Testamentum* 36 (July 1994), 215.

<sup>7</sup>C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 16-17.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>9</sup>Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 363. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1966), xxxiv-xxxix describe Brown's approach in much more detail.

<sup>10</sup>Barrett, 42-46.

### Literary Genre, Techniques and Structure

Many argue that in John there is much displacement and redaction, based on the presence of rough transitions and repetitive points in the text. Barrett argues against this theory.

That it may seem to me to make better sense when rearranged I do not regard as adequate reason for abandoning an order which undoubtedly runs back into the second century--the order, indeed, in which the book was *published*. . . .*Someone* published it substantially as it now stands; and I continue to make the assumption that he knew his business, and that it is the first duty of a commentator to bring out this person's meaning.<sup>11</sup>

The structure of the Gospel is most simply identified as the Prologue, the Book of Signs and the Book of Glory followed by an epilogue.<sup>12</sup>

The style of the Greek used in the Fourth Gospel is unique. The vocabulary is often unique and the linking of thoughts into one sentence is uncommon. Additionally, there are other grammatical idiosyncrasies. The influence of Aramaic is debated. The language is often apocalyptic in the sense of revealing secrets.<sup>13</sup>

The literary style includes a variety of genres: poetry, misunderstanding, double meanings, irony, inclusions (ending a section with a return to the thought used at the beginning of the section) and transitions from one section with a segue into the next. There is a legal tone to the Gospel as well, a ". . . forensic context . . . ." <sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Barrett, 22, emphasis his. Barrett defines the author as "the man (or group) who would accept responsibility for the book as we read it in the ancient MSS. . . ." (5 and 22).

<sup>12</sup>This is commonly recognized by scholars. See Thompson 323 and 373.

<sup>13</sup>See Barrett, 5-10, 31.

<sup>14</sup>Brown, *Introduction*, 333-337, 339.

John's Gospel is narrative literature. While the merit of using narrative for didactic purposes is debated by scholars, Banks points out that story telling is fundamentally important in understanding and learning for both the individual and group.<sup>15</sup> The passages at issue here are narratives, and we will look for the principles they communicate.

Characters in the Fourth Gospel are often regarded as functional and representative,<sup>16</sup> even if they were historical people (with the exception of Jesus).<sup>17</sup> The three passages studied here include important characters. For now, it will suffice to keep in mind that there are functional elements in John's characters.

### Use of the Old Testament

Excluding Revelation the Fourth Gospel uses more OT terms and imagery than any other NT book.<sup>18</sup> The author's use of the OT is unique among the NT literature in that he uses fewer exact quotations, opting instead for allusions, and does little proof-texting. He makes much of OT symbolism.<sup>19</sup> We will notice this in chapter 4, with the introduction of the "I am" statements.

All of these issues are foundational for a thorough study of the passages in question. They provide the context of the passages. Further, review of the prominent

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<sup>15</sup>R. J. Banks, "Narrative Exegesis," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992) 570.

<sup>16</sup>Functional characters serve a purpose, fulfilling a function in a narrative rather than solely representing facts. Representation of others of a particular group is one such "function."

<sup>17</sup>Conway, 49.

<sup>18</sup>Gail R. O'Day, "John," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Linge, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 77.

<sup>19</sup>See Barrett, 27-29.

themes in the Gospel of John will prepare us to recognize in what ways the passages may be important in advancing the author's purposes.

## **Purposes**

The purpose of the Gospel is overtly stated in 20:31: "... these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have eternal life in his name." This concept is repeated in 21:24, when the Gospel's trustworthiness is defended.

Traditionally the Fourth Gospel has been seen as an evangelistic gospel, convincing unbelievers of Jesus' messiahship; however, Thompson argues against such a purpose for the original audience. She notes that the "believe" in 20:31 could also be translated as "continue to believe," hence, it was probably written as an encouragement to second generation Christians.<sup>20</sup> For Thompson, the major purpose of the Gospel is to define Jesus as Messiah for later generations, including non-Jewish believers. The author begins with Jewish terms and images, but broadens the appeal to include all possible readers.<sup>21</sup>

While the initial purpose of the Gospel may have been to present Jesus as Messiah and encourage faith in him for second-generation Christians, the approach of the writer encourages faith for this generation as well. The way in which the Messiah is painted in this Gospel has implications for the life of the church today, and his interactions with

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<sup>20</sup> Thompson, "John," 372.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 373.

women provide an example of how women interact with this Messiah and in his community.

Barrett's comment on 20:31 represents many scholars' views regarding the purpose of the book.

. . . not that you may have a reliable account of what Jesus really did and taught, but that, whatever the details of his ministry may have been, you may believe. It is of fundamental importance to John that Jesus did in fact live and die and rise from the dead; but he uses the material in his gospel so that men may recognize their relationship to God in Jesus, rather than to convey interesting information about him. He means to write both history and theology - theological history.<sup>22</sup>

Not only is the faith of future generations important in this Gospel. Individual faith is also stressed. We read of individuals who encounter Jesus and come to believe in him as Messiah. The emphasis is on persons, rather than groups and crowds. John's Gospel includes a ". . . dramatic stress on one-to-one contacts with Jesus; the everyman and everywoman role of Johannine figures like the blind man and Samaritan woman, personifying different faith reactions . . ." make it the "spiritual gospel," as Clement of Alexandria called it.<sup>23</sup> John encourages each reader to experience Jesus personally, as we are drawn into the stories of others' encounters with him. Some of the most profound stories of faith in Jesus are the ones we will examine here.

In John's first twelve chapters in particular, the theme of "witness" is prominent.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Barrett, 5.

<sup>23</sup>Brown, *Introduction*, 378.

<sup>24</sup>A. A. Trites, "Witness," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 879. Trites asserts, "John follows rather closely the formal pattern of the covenant lawsuit which is worked out in detail in Isaiah 43-48. There God has a lawsuit with his people and takes them to court, calling witnesses and laying charges against them. In John, God incarnate in Jesus has a controversy with the world as it is incarnate in 'the Jews,' the Jewish leaders who epitomize the world in its opposition to the Gospel (Jn 5:16, 18; 6:41; 7:1; 10:31; 11:8)."

Throughout the Gospel, however, the writer seeks to provide a witness to Jesus as the Messiah (as in 20:31, noted above). The passages we study include witnesses of and to Jesus as Messiah.

## **Theological Themes in John**

### Christology

The Fourth Gospel portrays a high Christology. Jesus is the Word, he is God, "I Am," the Son of God, Messiah, and Son of Man. "Prophet" is descriptive, rather than a title in John.<sup>25</sup> Here there is a "sophisticated christology": "... Jesus *is* the Gospel, and ... the Gospel *is* Jesus."<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the Gospel, Jesus is the "I Am" – a divine name that first and second century Jews would recognize as an OT title for God. "I Am" statements in John represent Jesus in seven ways, naming him the bread of life (6:35, 41, 48, 51), light of the world (8:12; 9:5), door of the sheep (10:7, 9), good shepherd (10:11, 14), resurrection and the life (11:25), the way, the truth and the life (14:6), and the true vine (15:1, 5).<sup>27</sup> The frequency and uniqueness of this title makes the "I Am" statements significant.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup>Cf. Thompson, "John," 376-379.

<sup>26</sup>Barrett, 70.

<sup>27</sup>G. M. Burge, "I Am' Sayings," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 354. Thompson also addresses this, 368.

<sup>28</sup>See Burge 355-356. The term "messiah" was used frequently in the religions of the area. It is found in magic incantations and other extrabiblical texts. It is used much in the Old Testament, hence the Fourth Gospel's use of it regarding Jesus. "I Am" is a divine name.



Jesus' humanity is not an issue in John, but demonstrating his divinity is. The emphasis on his divinity almost to the exclusion of his humanity can make it appear that the Johannine community did not believe that he was human. However, the text does not ignore or eliminate his humanity (for instance, the disciples offer him food in 4:31). This indicates that the community took his humanity for granted, and it was not a point to be argued; the point in doubt was his divinity, hence its emphasis.<sup>29</sup>

John is unique among the gospels in its thematic and prominent use of "messiah" or "Christ."<sup>30</sup> Messianic hope is more prominent in John than in the Synoptics.<sup>31</sup> However, there is a tension between the messianic expectations of the Jewish community and the reality of the person of Jesus. For instance, the Mosaic Prophet who was expected to come would show signs, but the Davidic Messiah would not. Jesus frequently used signs in his self-revelations.<sup>32</sup>

In the Fourth Gospel,

Jesus is the uniquely commissioned agent of God who, in his task of bringing the salvation of God to the world, exercises a unique, mediating function between God and human beings. Because Jesus is the designated agent of God, he also represents God to human beings in such a way that the Gospel can say that to encounter Jesus is to encounter God, to have seen him is to have seen the Father (12:45; 14:7-9), or to know and receive him is to have known and received the Father (8:19; 12:44; 13:20; 17:8; cf. 15:23). As God's agent Jesus carries out a mission which mediates on God's salvation to the world, as is manifested in the signs which he does.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Rensberger, 24.

<sup>30</sup> Thompson, "John," 378.

<sup>31</sup> Barrett, 70.

<sup>32</sup> See Martyn, J. Louis. *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979, 111.

<sup>33</sup> Thompson, "John," 378-379.

## Signs/Miracles

Signs dominate the first major section of the Gospel, making the signs in Jesus' ministry another of the book's major themes.<sup>34</sup> Signs and miracles are prominent in the Fourth Gospel and impact the overall theology of the book. As noted above, signs are often part of the mean of Jesus' self-revelation to others. In the passages we study, we shall see examples of his use of signs and of his special revelation of himself to others without signs.

The context of the Gospel is "one grand miracle, the incarnation of the Logos (Jn. 1:14)." This is shown through the absence of birth narratives, as Jesus' origins are shown back to creation.<sup>35</sup>

We find only seven miracles in John. The stories themselves are distinctive in several ways. The miracles, or signs, in the Fourth Gospel do not include exorcisms. In the Synoptics, a miracle is called δύνάμις, "mighty deed," whereas in John it is called σημεῖον, "sign." In the Synoptics, miracles are used to describe and teach about the Kingdom of God. In John's Gospel, the signs lead to faith in the person of Jesus as Messiah. Faith is a result of a sign in John rather than a prerequisite for a miracle.<sup>36</sup> However, signs as a foundation for faith are not adequate in and of themselves.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 379.

<sup>35</sup>This is a common observation of scholars. For example, see B. L. Blackburn, "Miracles and Miracle Stories," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 555, 559.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 555-556. Blackburn gives a full discussion of the differences between the Synoptics' miracles and those in John.

<sup>37</sup>R. T. France, "Faith," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992) 225. Blackburn notes that miracles in the Fourth Gospel always ideally lead to faith, 550.

Blackburn notes that miracle stories serve several purposes in the overall design of each Gospel:

(1) they document qualities expected in the shepherd-Messiah . . . -compassion and mercy . . . ; (2) they demonstrate God's approbation of Jesus and his ministry, on the basis of the deeply rooted scriptural principle that miracles (performed within the framework of divine revelation) legitimate divinely authorized agents; and (3) aside from pre-Christian messianic expectations, their transmission and repetition are inevitable, given the desire of early Christians to glorify and exalt their Messiah.<sup>38</sup>

### Soteriology

Salvation is a prominent theme throughout the book.<sup>39</sup> The term "eternal life" is used more in John than in the Synoptics. Eternal life is gained through knowledge as opposed to simply making confession. Thompson sees this as pointing "to a cognitive dimension of salvation." Signs lead to salvation because they result in "'seeing' and 'understanding' in the Gospel of John, suggesting that salvation can be characterized as the response to the revelation that one sees."<sup>40</sup> Thus, signs are revelation, and the content of the revelation is God himself. Barrett notes that knowing God involves relationship with him.<sup>41</sup>

This emphasis on knowing and understanding illuminates the Gospel's emphasis on the importance of an individual's decision to enter into faith. It is by this faith that the reader of this Gospel enters into the people of God, the community of believers; inclusion

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 559.

<sup>39</sup>Brown, *Introduction*, 380.

<sup>40</sup>Thompson, "John," 380. Thompson also contrasts "knowing" and "believing" here, but does not give the basis for the separation. I do not see a logical reason for differentiating between the two.

<sup>41</sup>Barrett, 82.

is not dependent upon genetics.<sup>42</sup>

Salvation in the Fourth Gospel includes revelation and response to it.<sup>43</sup> It follows Jesus' task of revealing sin.<sup>44</sup> The Spirit is important in the process of coming to salvation.<sup>45</sup> The Fourth Gospel seems to hope that individuals will respond with belief to the Spirit, revelation, signs and the person of Jesus. We will see this hope realized in the passages we study.

In the Fourth Gospel, the verb πιστεύω is used mostly in one of 3 ways: (1) intellectual content is the focus 12 times, πιστεύω ὅτι, believe that, all in reference to believing that Jesus is the Christ. (2) πιστεύω εἰς, believe into, is found 36 times and πιστεύω ἐν, believe in, once. Outside the Fourth Gospel, this phrase occurs 10 times in the NT, three of these in 1 John. Thus, this usage is uniquely Johannine. (3) πιστεύω is found 30 times, with no explicit object of belief. This seems to be a "shorthand expression for Christian commitment." Usually, it is implied that the person of Jesus is the object of the faith, which demonstrates the narrow focus of "faith" for John.<sup>46</sup> In John, faith in Jesus "requires a break with rival forms of Jewish belief."<sup>47</sup> While the faith of devout Jews was focused on Yahweh and Torah, the faith of Christians was focused on the person of Jesus.

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<sup>42</sup>Thompson, "John," 381. On 382, Thompson points out that the emphasis on the individual is balanced by the importance of one's responsibilities within the community, and the emphasis on love between believers. See also France, 225.

<sup>43</sup>Thompson, "John," 381.

<sup>44</sup>Barrett, 80.

<sup>45</sup>Thompson, "John," 382.

<sup>46</sup>France, 225.

<sup>47</sup>Rensberger, 60.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Cultural-Historical Background of the Fourth Gospel**

The context of the Fourth Gospel must be considered on several levels. The background issues provide some insight, but understanding the full setting of the author and intended audience requires review of more information. The Gospel was developed within a religious setting, so we must examine what we know regarding the state of Judaism and the young Christian sect within it. We must also consider the political climate in which the author and community developed and used the Gospel, and the societal structures and norms they likely experienced. Given that this study focuses on passages which include two deaths, we will examine the death customs of the day. In addition, we must endeavor to understand the typical life situation of women in the region and time period, since the goal of this study is to understand the significance of the women in these passages.

The body of materials addressing these questions of context is enormous. We will survey the current scholarship and draw conclusions from which we will proceed. These conclusions are tentative, however, given the fact that ongoing archaeological research and other academic inquiries continue to increase our insight into the life of the Ancient Near East.

#### **Religious Background**

Judaism included several sects. The Sadducees held that only the written Torah was authoritative. The Pharisees endorsed separation from the surrounding society. They adhered to the written Torah and added the Oral Law.

Another group, the Essenes, started as early as 200 B.C.E., but probably after 152 B.C.E. Less strict than the Pharisees and more liberal than Sadducees, the Essenes believed in resurrection of the body.<sup>1</sup> They were separatists not only from the surrounding culture, but also from the Jerusalem Temple, as they opposed the behavior of the priests.

Women participated in the earliest days of the new Christian sect. Women were present on the Day of Pentecost when God's Spirit was poured out on all believers, including women.<sup>2</sup> Women were among the first converts in the newly established church.<sup>3</sup>

#### Similarities Between the Fourth Gospel and Gnosticism

Gnosticism, a philosophical and theological thought system, held that knowledge is the basis of salvation. Gnostics believed that one who knows the way of salvation and knows the Scriptures cannot give up his or her salvation, regardless of the person's behavior.

Gnosticism included terminology and concepts we find in the Fourth Gospel, including the idea of not being of this world and a distinction between light and darkness. John also expresses these concepts, including reference to the idea of darkness (which enhances misunderstanding) in chapter 20. However, developed Gnosticism only appears in documents dated after the Fourth Gospel. Perhaps Gnosticism was "an exaggerated interpretation of that Gospel."<sup>4</sup> In addition, the gnostic terminology which John uses is

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<sup>1</sup>Brown, *Introduction*, 77.

<sup>2</sup>Acts 2:1-18.

<sup>3</sup>Acts 16:14-15.

<sup>4</sup>Brown, *Introduction*, 93.

also present in the Dead Sea Scrolls, which are documents used by the Essene community in that area and time. This demonstrates that the vocabulary shared by John and Gnosticism does not require that John be viewed as a gnostic Gospel.

### Religious and Philosophical Voices

For Jews, the Pentateuch is authoritative in matters of faith and practice. "Two or three" witnesses are required in order to execute someone for a crime (Deut. 17:6). The same is required for conviction of any crime, according to Deut. 19:15. Josephus, writing in the first century C.E., reiterates the requirement for two or three witnesses. However, Josephus specifically bans women's testimony ". . . because of the levity and temerity of their sex. . . ." <sup>5</sup> Later we shall further examine the place of women in Josephus' and others' views.

### **Johannine Community**

It is commonly held among scholars that the Fourth Gospel was developed within a community, referred to as the Johannine Community. Brown surmises the community was rejected and persecuted because the world opposed Jesus, whom they worshipped. The community was separated from the world, and perhaps left Palestine and became part of the Diaspora. <sup>6</sup> The Johannine community was a stranger in its world as was Jesus according to 1:11. The Fourth Gospel's emphasis on the exclusivity of Jesus as the way

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<sup>5</sup>Josephus Flavius, *Jewish Antiquities Book IV*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, The Loeb Classical Library, ed. G. P. Goold (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930; reprint, 1978), 581. Further, the Mishnah (Shabuot 4:1) applies laws governing oaths to men and not to women. Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 626.

<sup>6</sup>Brown, *Introduction*, 375.

to God hints at their closed society based on a shared relationship through Christ rather than through natural family.<sup>7</sup>

Rensberger considers the community a sect of Jewish Christianity that was removed from the mainstream of the public and led a somewhat isolated life, but had not given up the idea of mission.<sup>8</sup> It was likely in this type of community that the passages we will study took shape.

### **Social Context**

Many clubs and societies existed in Greco-Roman society. R. E. Brown interprets this to mean that "there seems to have been a felt need 'to belong,' . . . ." <sup>9</sup> Often Jews did not participate in these groups because of dietary restrictions<sup>10</sup> and cleanliness laws.

Christians were probably highly suspect because they didn't participate in the civic cults, and alienated themselves. That isolation probably caused them to need reinforcement and encouragement.<sup>11</sup>

Economic conditions were different from our modern Western understanding and experience. Poverty in that day and location was not the way it is now. The poor had

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<sup>7</sup>S. C. Barton, "Family," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992) 229.

<sup>8</sup>Rensberger, 28.

<sup>9</sup>Brown, *Introduction*, 65.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 66.



small farms or worked the land on someone else's estate. Jesus' description as a carpenter "might be compared to 'a blue collar worker in lower-middle-class America.'"<sup>12</sup>

### Education

The approach to education varied according to the primary culture of the family. For Greeks, most schools were limited to male students. Education of Greek girls was uncommon. Upper-class Roman girls had a little more opportunity for education than their Greek counterparts. Roman girls and boys may have been educated together until the age of 14. At that age, boys became eligible to vote and began preparing for their careers while girls were soon married.<sup>13</sup>

Most people in the Roman empire were not literate. Literacy was limited to the elite – among the Jews, probably the scribes and Pharisees.<sup>14</sup> Instead of written records and communication, they developed “oral technologies” which allowed them to memorize and use immense amounts of information.<sup>15</sup> The women in our passages were likely uneducated.

### **Death and the Afterlife**

Jewish views of death and the afterlife were varied in the NT period.<sup>16</sup> Usually they prepared the body for burial by washing and anointing. Cremation was popular from

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<sup>12</sup>Brown, *Introduction*, 67, cites Meier, Marginal 1.280-85.

<sup>13</sup>Jeffers, 254-255.

<sup>14</sup>Richard A. Horsley, *Archaeology, History and Society in Galilee: The Social Context of Jesus and the Rabbis* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1996), 157-158.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 157.

<sup>16</sup>Ferguson, 519.

about 400 B.C.E. into the first century, but lost popularity. Burial became the most common means of disposing of the body in the second century C.E. People commonly believed that to leave the body unburied was hazardous to the deceased person's soul.

Typically, a tomb was closed with a large rock, which was itself held in place by a smaller stone. Twelve months after the initial burial, the bones were taken out and placed in an ossuary. This second event was done to provide a definitive time for the mourning period, and perhaps also "to assure the sinlessness of the deceased by means of the expiation accorded in the process of decomposition. . . ." <sup>17</sup>

Romans refused to bury criminals.

Tacitus notes that a person legally condemned forfeited his estate and was debarred from burial (Ann. 6.29). Victims of crucifixion remained on their crosses as a matter of course, left to carrion birds as a continuing deterrent against crimes against the state. <sup>18</sup>

The Jews extended funeral rites to criminals and other executed persons. Those funerals were different, though, in that the deceased could not be buried in their family tombs. <sup>19</sup> Instead, they were buried in tombs overseen by the Sanhedrin for the first year, the time period thought to be needed for the purifying (and assumedly painful) decay of the body, and then the remains were released to the family. Since the family did not have the body during the mourning period, they were denied the right to mourn. <sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Green, 89. Green cites Rahmani; Meyers, 91-92. Also discussed in Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 276-277.

<sup>18</sup>Joel B. Green, "Burial of Jesus," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 89.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Malina and Rohrbaugh, 276.

These funerary practices will illumine our examination of John 11 and 20, the scenes at the tomb of Lazarus and the risen Jesus, below.

## **Witnesses**

We have already established that “witness” is a major motif in the Fourth Gospel. This is significant because Jewish law required multiple witnesses.<sup>21</sup>

In examining the passages regarding the Samaritan woman (4:1-42), Martha at Lazarus' tomb (11:1-44) and Mary at Jesus' tomb (20:1-18), we must consider the significance of women as witnesses. (The question of whether the women in the specific passages are indeed witnesses in any material way will be considered in a later chapter.) If they are witnesses, it is significant given that women were disallowed as witnesses, as discussed above.

## **Context for Women**

Josephus refers to women throughout his writings and uses feminine qualities as examples of weakness. Josephus also teaches that woman is inferior to man "in all things," based on the result of the Fall in Genesis 3:16, and therefore should be submissive to man.<sup>22</sup>

Philo's writings represent the philosophy common in the day in which John's Gospel was developed. He wrote extensively about the propriety of limiting women to the domestic sphere. He notes that women are to

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<sup>21</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities*, 581; Deut. 19:15.

<sup>22</sup>Josephus Falvius, *Against Apion*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, The Loeb Classical Library, ed. G. P. Goold (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926; reprint, 1976), 373.

... cultivate solitude ... not be seen to be going about like a woman who walks the streets in the sight of other men, except when it is necessary for her to go to the temple ... and even then let her not go at noon when the market is full. ...<sup>23</sup>

Philo's interpretation of Scripture is allegorical, and he utilizes opportunities from Scripture to summarize his view of women. He describes Eve as slow, excessively prudent, and "prompted by an unstable and rash mind ..." which led to her decision to eat of the fruit and give it to her husband.<sup>24</sup>

Philo teaches there are two kinds of souls: one is masculine, found only in men, and devoted solely to God. The other is feminine. He describes the souls of women:

... depends upon all the things which are created, and as such are liable to destruction, and which puts forth, as it were, the hand of its power in order that in a blind sort of way it may lay hold of whatever comes across it, clinging to a generation which admits of an innumerable quantity of changes and variations, when it ought rather to cleave to the unchangeable, blessed, and thrice happy divine nature.<sup>25</sup>

Further, Plutarch says, "The name of a good woman, like her person, ought to be shut up indoors and never go out."<sup>26</sup> The common view was that public activity and interaction was reserved for men, and women were to limit their lives to their homes.

Roman women experienced greater freedom in public and more independence. The Roman ideal was for a female to pass from her father's keeping to her husband's, but Roman women had more freedom and higher status than Greek, who were more limited.

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<sup>23</sup>Philo, *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, rev. ed. trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 611.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 612.

<sup>26</sup>From *In Praise of Women* 242E. Cited in Malina and Rohrbaugh, 104-105. See especially Kathleen E. Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993). While focusing on the impact of this tradition of public versus private space on the Synoptics, the principles of Corley's work can also be applied to Johannine studies. See also Ferguson, 70.

Jewish women had more public freedoms than Greek women but were not as free as Roman women.<sup>27</sup> A woman's wealth and social status dictated the amount of her freedom and influence.

Women could be prominent in Roman religions. Some scholars point to religions from the Mediterranean and Egypt and note their popularity among women as evidence of religious freedom for women.<sup>28</sup> Further evidence of women's prominence in specific circumstances has surfaced in archaeological studies. Women's names have been found on material discoveries in lists of professionals, including doctors and artists.<sup>29</sup> Such positions of leadership were generally limited to upper-class women.<sup>30</sup>

In some circles Jewish women took limited initiative in their lives, as evidenced by "substantial non-literary evidence."<sup>31</sup> In spite of the evidence of some women holding offices in synagogues, Jewish culture was less open to change than the cultures around it.<sup>32</sup>

Yet even those cultures which were more open to change were slow to do so. There were no mavericks, only people who supported "tradition" - and those who did not were selfish and rebellious.<sup>33</sup> Greek and Roman cultures honored traditional women.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Ferguson, 71.

<sup>28</sup>Jeffers, 251.

<sup>29</sup>Ferguson, 72.

<sup>30</sup>Judy Brown, *Women Ministers According to Scripture*. Kearney: Morris Publishing, 1996. 122.

<sup>31</sup>Scholer, 881.

<sup>32</sup>J. Brown, 122.

<sup>33</sup>Jeffers, 249.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 250.

Roman women who exercised more freedom than typical in their culture were assumed to belong to cults. Thus, the involvement of women in Christianity would be limited to an extent by its cultural setting.

J. Brown has examined the interaction of Jesus with women, as those stories have been passed down to us in the Gospels.

Jesus violated all rabbinical teaching regarding the treatment of women. He went out of His way to include them and to elevate them in ways that were absolutely amazing to the people of His day. He also cut across all cultural convention in His treatment of Samaritans and Gentiles. . . .<sup>35</sup>

Further, J. Brown notes that Jesus treated women the same as men. "He viewed both as being fully capable of spiritual understanding and as being totally responsible for their own spiritual decisions."<sup>36</sup> The very presence of women in Jesus' ministry "was a radical departure from the norms of the day."<sup>37</sup> His interactions with women, and the assertiveness with which he approached women, "can only be interpreted as a deliberate attempt on the part of the Son of God to change how His people would view and treat women from that day forward."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>J. Brown, 127-128. I have thought this to be the case for some time. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), chapters 1 and 2, presents strong arguments against the idea that Jesus challenged his culture. Her point is that he could have done much more had that been his intention. However, I view these arguments as supporting a presupposed position on the part of Schussler Fiorenza based on deconstructionism, rather than freeing her and her colleagues from bias. I recognize that my own position on this matter and my hermeneutics are tightly intertwined with my beliefs regarding the inspiration and authority of the Scripture, and my view of women. I am also coming to believe that history as reported by any one group and decisions regarding canonicity as made by any one group are subject to the biases of that group, whether acknowledged by the group or not. I am unable at this time to draw a full conclusion on this subject. I shall leave it as this brief mention.

<sup>36</sup>J. Brown, 128-129.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 129.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

## Family

Given that the primary sphere of women was the home, an overview of the family structure is in order. Marriages in the Roman Empire took on three forms, each of which constituted *unus* - marriage in which the woman was subject to the husband: *confarreatio* involved a religious ceremony and was a very formal arrangement; *coemptio* was when a man bought a wife; and in *usus*, the couple had been living together in the man's house for one uninterrupted year. Marriage without *manus* (not living together) was by mutual consent, and the wife remained with her father's family instead of changing her family alignment to her husband's.<sup>39</sup>

Only the marriages of Roman citizens were legally recognized. For others, the type without *manus* was most common. The remaining marriages were informal and the children born from them were considered illegitimate.<sup>40</sup> Bigamy was not permitted under Roman law. Jews allowed bigamy, but probably adopted the mores of the cultures around them.<sup>41</sup>

Late in the Roman Empire, divorce was frequent. In addition, life expectancy was low, so there were probably many remarriages and blended families.<sup>42</sup> Roman divorce usually meant the woman lost custody of her children.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Ferguson, 66-67.

<sup>40</sup>Jeffers 238.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 239-240.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 239 and 244.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 246.

Roman families were paternal: the father ruled the whole family regardless of how far away they moved. In Greek families the father did not have as much power, but still had the most authority.<sup>44</sup>

The background on family structure and relationships will color the women in our passages, particularly the Samaritan woman and Martha.

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 239.



### Chapter 3 The Samaritan Woman: 4:1-42

The Fourth Gospel's scene of Jesus talking with the Samaritan woman at the well has evoked much scholarly discussion. As we shall see, there is much controversy and many opinions. The characters are fascinating, the story rich with meaning. It introduces Jesus' mission to non-Jews,<sup>1</sup> and therefore is crucial to the Gospel.

In the examination to follow, we will review the historical context and examine the literary techniques employed in this story. We will examine the germane points in the scholarly debate surrounding this passage,<sup>2</sup> and draw some conclusions regarding the meaning of the text. We will see that this passage in its context demonstrates full inclusion of all people, regardless of race, class, background or gender, in the mission of Jesus. The discussion will proceed according to the progression of the story in the Gospel.

#### **A Samaritan Woman, a Jewish Man, a Well and Water**

Jesus set out from Judea toward Galilee. The fastest route through this area required a traveler to pass through Samaria.<sup>3</sup> The assertion that "he had to go through Samaria" (v. 4) seems less a demand or "leading" and more a decision based on commonly traveled routes.

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<sup>1</sup>See, for instance, Danna Nolan Fewell and Gary A. Phillips, "Drawn to Excess, or Reading Beyond Betrothal," *Semeia* 77 (1997), 26. This scene introduces Jesus in interactions with non-Jews and shows the resulting belief on the part of the Samaritan people.

<sup>2</sup>Many debates occur regarding symbolism in this story. Arguments range from colonization (rare) to the meaning of the water jar being left behind (common). We will limit our examination to the ones most commonly discussed and see how these influence our understanding of the passage.

<sup>3</sup>Barrett, 230.

As we have seen, the ancient world was divided into the public and private spheres.<sup>4</sup> The division was based on gender and included the ideas of honor and shame, or aggressiveness and modesty.<sup>5</sup> The public sphere was the world of men and represented sexual aggression. The private world was the woman's domain, in which she took care of the household and family. The private world symbolized sexual virtue. Women were "deemed virtuous in terms of their defense of their sexual exclusivity,"<sup>6</sup> which they demonstrated by staying indoors, within the private sector.<sup>7</sup>

These values raise several questions about this scene, in which we find Jesus conversing with a woman in a public place. First, custom and the separation of spheres dictated that women drew water in the morning or evening (Gen. 24:11 and 29:7). However, this woman came at noon (v. 6). Women generally came together but this woman came alone, which forced her outside the protection of other women (thus "private") and into the "public."<sup>8</sup>

The conversation is odd within its cultural context, because she should not have been speaking to a non-related male. Rather, women, when given reason to be in public, were expected to remain silent.<sup>9</sup> The fact that the two were of opposite sex and not

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<sup>4</sup>Corley, 24-75. Corley builds a solidly detailed case for viewing ancient mores in terms of the division of space into public and private, with women limited to the private sphere and men thrust into the public sphere. See also Jerome H. Neyrey, "What's Wrong with This Picture? John 4, Cultural Stereotypes of Women, and Public and Private Space," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 24 (Summer 1994), 78. Neyrey thoroughly summarizes the subject.

<sup>5</sup>Neyrey, 78-79.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 78.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 80. See also Oeconomicus, 7.21; Aristotle, *Oeconomica* 1.3.4; 1343b 30-1344a 9 and Keuls, 228-65.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 82. Also R. Brown, *The Gospel*, A, 169.

<sup>9</sup>Neyrey, 81. See also Plutarch, *Lycurgus and Numa* 3.5.

related made the conversation even more scandalous than the fact that it was between a Jew and a Samaritan.<sup>10</sup>

Turning to the conversation itself, we see that Jesus initiates it. He requests a drink of water. He is alone, since his disciples had gone to buy food. The fact that he is alone and requests a drink of water is reminiscent of other well scenes, with which the original readers would probably have been familiar. Wells are the location of several betrothal scenes in the OT (see Gen. 24:10-49; 29:4-14; Exod. 2:15-22). These well scenes follow a pattern. A foreign man, alone, meets a woman at well. She draws water for him and runs home to tell her family about him. He is invited to stay and a marriage is arranged.<sup>11</sup> This is all done within social customs - other women are present, women speak when spoken to but do not reveal personal information, and the women return to their families.

John skillfully uses this paradigm to surprise us: no physical water is drawn; the woman does not rush back to her family but instead to her town; there is no meal, no engagement. These elements are different from the other well stories.<sup>12</sup>

As the conversation begins, Jesus' request for water may have seemed familiar to the woman. However, her response reflects surprise - because he was a Jew, and a man. Jews did not have conversations with Samaritans, and certainly would not share a drinking vessel. Verse 9 tells us that the discord between Jews and Samaritans of that day was common knowledge. Samaritans saw themselves as the true Israel; in some literature

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<sup>10</sup>Barrett, 228.

<sup>11</sup>Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 48.

<sup>12</sup>Fewell and Phillips, 27.

they criticized Jewish circumcision because the rite was useless for a group they viewed as outside Israel.<sup>13</sup> Jews regarded Samaritans in the same way. Additionally, Jews viewed female Samaritans as unclean according to a halakhic statement (maybe from the mid-first century): "the daughters of the Samaritans are menstruants from their cradle' (*b. Nid.* 31b) . . . ," hence making them ceremonially unclean.<sup>14</sup> Although this note in v. 9 appears to be inserted by the author as an editorial note and is not part of the statement by the woman, it reflects the attitude of suspicion between Jews and their neighbors.<sup>15</sup>

Jesus continues the discussion along the lines of water and drinking, but turns it to eternal matters: the gift of living water. He introduces the question of his identity (verse 10). If she knew who he was, she would know what kind of man is asking for water - that he's the man who could give her living water.

She takes him literally, still thinking about physical water from the well. She points out that he has no means whereby to get water out of the well. She challenges what she perceives as a Jewish air of superiority, by referring to her ancestor Jacob who built the well. Jesus gives more of an indication in verses 13 and 14 that the water of which he speaks is spiritual, saying it leads to eternal life. She begins to understand that he is talking about special water, and replies that she would indeed like to have some - so she would not have to return to draw water daily. This last comment in verse 15 reveals her continued focus on physical water. Although she recognizes he's talking about something unusual, she still thinks of "water" in the literal sense.

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<sup>13</sup>R. J. Coggins, *Samaritans and Jews: The Origins of Samaritanism Reconsidered*. Growing Points in Theology series (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), 135.

<sup>14</sup>Williamson, 728. See also Barrett, 232.

<sup>15</sup>Barrett, 232.

Misunderstanding is a common motif in the Fourth Gospel. This instance is a classic example of the Johannine use of irony. Some say that the irony here - misunderstanding the imagery of water, asking him if he is greater than Jacob, which, the reader of course knows he is<sup>16</sup> - is evidence of her incompetence.<sup>17</sup> However, she is not portrayed as incompetent,<sup>18</sup> but as a thinking and rightfully suspicious person. There is no reasonable way she could have intuitively known that this stranger was talking about eternal life in the personal and spiritual sense; this was a random, chance meeting from her perspective, and she was not going to make herself vulnerable too readily. Her misunderstandings show us the progress in her journey to faith, and do not hint at ignorance.<sup>19</sup>

Jesus changes the subject from water to ask her to call her husband at the point in the story when, in typical well betrothal stories, there would be an invitation extended to the man to meet the family and stay with them.<sup>20</sup> At this point the tone of the conversation changes and becomes personal. She answers his request (she should call her husband) with the surface, minimally factual, answer, "I am not married." This gives Jesus an opportunity to delve deeper and begin revealing his identity.

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<sup>16</sup>R. Brown, *Introduction*, 343; *The Gospel*, A, 170. See also Hendrikus Boers, *Neither on This Mountain Nor in Jerusalem: A Study of John 4*, SBLMS 35 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 154, for a discussion on the irony of her asking whether he is greater than Jacob.

<sup>17</sup>Fewell and Phillips, 25.

<sup>18</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 106.

<sup>19</sup>Neyrey 84. See also R. Brown, *The Gospel*, A, 176. "The gift of God" and "living water" were terms used in Judaism to describe or denote the Torah. If the usage carried over to the Samaritans, she would have understood that he was presenting himself as the replacement of the Torah. See also Barrett, 233, for a discussion of the misunderstanding motif in John.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 39.

The discussion begins to include her sexual past, which was outside the realm of cultural expectations. Jewish rabbis held that a widow could remarry for a second marriage, or at most a third.<sup>21</sup> Whether the Samaritan priests held the same or similar views has not been resolved. The text does not tell us whether she was married or divorced.

Thus, her relational past is dark. To discuss this with a man to whom she is not related would seem very out of place in this culture.<sup>22</sup> This makes it easy to imagine that the scene was rather shocking to its original audience.

### **Revelation of Jesus' Identity**

Jesus here (v. 17) leads the woman into deeper conversation, forcing her to admit, if not examine, her own condition. This stranger, a Jewish man, initiates conversation about her past and her present.<sup>23</sup> He does not comment on the sinfulness or justification of her relationships. He simply announces them as fact.

This gets her attention. She acknowledges that he is a prophet - but turns the conversation away from her back to generic, less threatening subjects. If the scene were to be played in modern Hollywood, there would be a moment of pregnant silence, in which she is frozen in this revelation regarding her life. Then, she acknowledges what happened and moves on, trying to appear unaffected by the fact that her life was just laid open by a total stranger.

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<sup>21</sup>See, for instance, Koester 49.

<sup>22</sup>Neyrey 81. He cites Plutarch, *In Praise of Women*, 242ff; Plutarch, *Camillus*, 8.3 133A; Livy, *Ab Urbe Cond.*, 5.50.7; Cicero, *De Orat.*, 2.1.44; and Plutarch, *Sayings of the Spartans*, 217ff.

<sup>23</sup>On the point that Jesus consistently takes the initiative here, see Barrett, 232.

The meaning of Jesus' mention of her former husbands and her current living arrangement has been the subject of much debate. Many scholars view this as a symbolic reference to the religious infidelity of Samaria, referring to Josephus' listing of five foreign influences with which Samaritans had intermarried and, in some views, syncretized their worship. However, the OT passage describing the history of Samaria (2 Kings 17:30-32, 41) says there were seven such foreign entities.<sup>24</sup> Others suggest that the five husbands represent the Samaritans' adherence to the five books of the Pentateuch. Barrett argues well against this position and suggests that the real purpose is to contrast past disappointments to true satisfaction in Jesus.<sup>25</sup> Raymond Brown notes that the Hebrew word for husband was also a name for pagan deities. He interprets this as a play on words, rather than as direct symbolism.<sup>26</sup> This view seems least likely to impose outside ideas on the text. Regardless, five husbands seems excessive according to many scholars.<sup>27</sup>

After Jesus reveals that the woman has a questionable past and she acknowledges his supernatural proclamation, she redirects the conversation. She turns to theology. Jews and Samaritans had some significant differences in their theology, not the least of which was the location of proper worship. Jews held that true worship took place in Jerusalem, on Mt. Zion, and Samaritans believed that proper worship occurred in their

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<sup>24</sup>Barrett, 235. See also Bruce, 107. Koester, 49 (among others), says the husbands do represent Samaria's religious history.

<sup>25</sup>Barrett, 235.

<sup>26</sup>R. Brown, *The Gospel*, A, 171.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

region, on Mt. Gerizim.<sup>28</sup> She turns to this conflict and asks Jesus to comment on it; a prophet certainly should have some insight on this issue. She demonstrates that she is interesting in theological issues and engages the prophet in conversation - an unusual act for a woman in her context.

Jesus does indeed have an answer. However, John surprises readers (and Jesus surprises the woman) with the answer. Jesus moves the question of proper worship outside the realm of physical locations, and into the realm of the condition of the worshipper's heart. He says unequivocally that salvation is from the Jews, and that Samaritans are misguided. He follows that with a look to the future, and says that this future day is now here, when it doesn't matter that the Jew is right and the Samaritan is wrong, because location is now irrelevant.

Perhaps again she does not understand him. Her reply is that she knows the Messiah is coming and will explain all of this to her and her people. This seems to imply that she needs more explanation, and she trusts in the Messiah to deliver it at the right time.

The Samaritans believed in the coming of a prophet like Moses. Some say they believed Moses would return, as "the 'restorer' or 'returning one'".<sup>29</sup> They referred to this

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<sup>28</sup>The issue of the location of worship was one of the major disagreements between Samaritans and Jews. For instance, see R. Brown, *The Gospel*, A, 170. Other points of contention include that the Samaritans blocked the restoration of Jerusalem after the return from exile in Babylon and sided against the Jews and with the Syrian kings in wars in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. In 128 B.C.E. the Jewish high priest burned the Elephantine (Mt. Gerizim) Temple. For further discussion of the theology of the Samaritans, see Williamson, 727; Ferguson, 501; Coggins, 132-134; John Bowman, *The Samaritan Problem: Studies in the Relationships of Samaritanism, Judaism, and Early Christianity*, trans. Alfred M. Johnson, Jr., Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series Number 4. (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1975), 5-8, 31.

<sup>29</sup>Williamson, 727; see also Ferguson, 500.



expected prophet as Taheb, and looked for him to come in peace and reveal the Truth.<sup>30</sup> Samaritan texts developed after the time of Christ expected the Day of Vengeance to be "a day on which the Lord of the world reveals himself and declares: I, even I, am He, and there is no other beside Me."<sup>31</sup> In spite of the lateness of these texts, the Taheb expectations apply here.<sup>32</sup> These thoughts were likely already circulated orally prior to their written recording. While the use of the word "Messiah" was likely a choice made by the final redactor, the woman's claim to believe in a Messiah confirms that the idea was known.<sup>33</sup>

Her deferral to the Messiah, or prophet like Moses, opens the door for Jesus to reveal his full identity to her. He begins with the "I Am" statement - the first of several Johannine uses of this OT formulaic designation for the God who called to Moses out of the burning bush and sent him to Pharaoh (Exod. 3:14: "I AM who I AM").<sup>34</sup> This formula in Jesus' final revelation of himself to her (v. 26: "I am he, . . . ") and the revealing of the Lord on the Day of Vengeance contain strikingly similar phrasing (Memar IV.12: "I, even I, am he."). If this particular phrasing was in use among the Samaritans at the time of Jesus, the woman likely would have made the connection in her

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<sup>30</sup>John Bowman, trans. and ed., *Samaritan Documents Relating to Their History, Religion and Life*, Pittsburgh Original Texts and Translation Series, Dikran Y. Hadidian, gen. ed. (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1977), "Markah on the Day of Vengeance," 256.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 255.

<sup>32</sup>R. Brown, *The Gospel*, A, 172. For a dissenting view, see John Macdonald, *The Theology of the Samaritans* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 42 and 173. Macdonald asserts that these documents were developed after Christianity and influenced Samaritan theology.

<sup>33</sup>Barrett 329; for related discussion, see Bruce 111.

<sup>34</sup>This use is not metaphorical, as are the other uses listed earlier. Instead, this is a direct identification: Jesus is talking about himself.

mind between this man and her own expectations. We are not told what conclusion she reached about his identity.

In the text she falls silent at this point, perhaps because of the revelation or because of the return of the disciples - or likely a combination of the two factors. She leaves her water jar at the well and returns to the city. She begins telling people that they need to come see this man, a prophet who knew all about her. She does not tell them that he says he is the Messiah, but rather asks the people if this could be possible.<sup>35</sup>

The water jar is another detail around which there is much scholarly debate. What does her leaving the jar at the well symbolize? Neyrey asserts that it confirms she did not go home, but to the public marketplace (v. 28). Others hold that the presence of the jar indicates she intended to return to the well.<sup>36</sup> Yet others make it a large issue of artistic symbolism, representing her presence and the point of contact between her and Jesus.<sup>37</sup> Barrett presumes that the woman left it so Jesus could drink from it. Some say she was in a hurry. Others say she was breaking with her past, which Barrett says is "very improbable."<sup>38</sup> Bruce takes this view, however, saying it represents breaking from the ceremonial religion of Jews and Samaritans.<sup>39</sup> Schneiders takes a similar view, asserting it represents the call to discipleship and to leave the former life behind.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Francis J. Moloney, *Belief in the Word: Reading John 1-4* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 157.

<sup>36</sup>Neyrey, 85.

<sup>37</sup>Fewell and Phillips, 43 and 47.

<sup>38</sup>Barrett, 240. See also Boers, 182-183. Boers says that the dropped water jar is very significant in that it is the opposite of his living water, so she abandons it to embrace his "water" and participate in his mission.

<sup>39</sup>Bruce, 112.

<sup>40</sup>Schnieders, 40.

Moloney takes a more limited view: that the discarded jar is simply a clue to the reader that the interrupted conversation is not over and proves nothing else.<sup>41</sup> This position seems most likely, because it requires the least amount of assumption beyond the text. The jar is almost a dramatic bookmark as the story takes on a slightly different rhythm, although the woman's encounter with Jesus is not being put aside - it is simply commented on, as we shall see below.

### **Commentary: The Harvest**

The return of Jesus' disciples with food leads to a change in the focus of the story. While the woman is away telling her town about Jesus (which we shall examine closely in the next section), the disciples and Jesus have their own conversation.

The disciples (presumably the Twelve) return to find Jesus talking with a Samaritan woman. Verse 27 tells us they were shocked. Many commentators believe that their response was to the fact of the conversation with a woman, rather than to the Samaritan/Jewish element. Jesus' acceptance of her work as part of the harvest (see below) vindicates her against the objections of others (as evidenced by the shock of the disciples).<sup>42</sup>

The disciples encourage Jesus to eat, but he tries to help them see longer-lasting priorities. Here is another use of misunderstanding. Like the woman's misunderstanding

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<sup>41</sup>Moloney, 170.

<sup>42</sup>Schneiders, 40, asserts their shock was a response to him talking to a woman, and she assumes that in the Johannine community not everyone wanted to fully include women. She seems to be contradicting herself, because she builds on the foundation of women being integral in the community. She and others point to the defense Jesus gives in his discussion of the harvest as being a direct defense of her involvement, which seems to be a valid interpretation. Further, however, they assert that the conversation is largely aimed at the prejudice against women. Brown, *The Gospel*, vol. A, 173 also notes the disciples' shock and attributes it to the male/female conversation. Brown cites Bultmann. See also Williamson, 881.

about water, the disciples misunderstand Jesus' speech about food.<sup>43</sup> He explains that he is nourished and sustained by doing the will of God, and completing his mission. He then moves into a discourse on the harvest.

The placement of this discourse in verses 34-38 is debated as an unfortunate insertion by an editor or as a legitimate placement by the author.<sup>44</sup> Moloney says it fits. Barrett cautions against making too much of what is probably an accidental writing pattern.<sup>45</sup> However, the discourse serves to interpret its literary context as a glimpse into the mission of Jesus, which includes Samaritans. Jesus' teaching serves to comment on what has happened so far.<sup>46</sup>

Further, Jesus' discussion of the harvest explains what is about to happen in the narrative.<sup>47</sup> His comments on the story require that we look for the elements of his illustration within the story. The reaper is Jesus, the sower is the woman,<sup>48</sup> and there is an explicit connection between Jesus' doing the will of the Father and completing the Father's work in reaping the Samaritan harvest.<sup>49</sup>

Following the conversation on the harvest, we see a harvest take place. We are not told whether the woman herself returns, but many people from that city come to him

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<sup>43</sup>R. Alan Culpepper, *The Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 161. See also Barrett, 240 and Bruce, 113.

<sup>44</sup>Moloney, 146. See also Gail R. O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Mode and Theological Claim* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 53-54.

<sup>45</sup>Barrett, 241.

<sup>46</sup>Moloney, 164.

<sup>47</sup>Boers, 187.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 184-185, 190-191. See also Barrett, 242.

<sup>49</sup>Boers, 190-191.

because she had told them that he is a prophet, and perhaps the Messiah. They invite him to stay with them, a request he honors. Many more believe. They tell the woman it is no longer on the basis of her testimony, but because of their personal encounters with Jesus that they have come to know that he is the Savior of the world.

As noted above, Jesus' acceptance of her involvement in the harvest is her vindication. Thus, the overall journey of the passage is completed.<sup>50</sup> It has progressed in John's typical fashion, moving the main character (opposite Jesus) from the known to the unknown, as Jesus guides her skillfully.<sup>51</sup>

### **Summarizing the Passage**

#### The Character of the Woman: Historicity, Function

The woman is surprising in that her background is unvirtuous. She is unconventional, with her theological knowledge and ability to engage in debate about issues of national importance. She is spontaneous and assertive, as she makes herself a public witness to Jesus.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Boers, 192, asserts that in the passage the living water is like the food of which Jesus spoke: participating in the mission of the Father, and the woman did just that. The complete equivalence of the living water to the food of doing the Father's will seems to be an oversimplification which overlooks the "eternal life" that is held in the living water, according to verse 14. However, the context of Samaritan mission does seem appropriate.

<sup>51</sup>C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 316. See also R. Brown, *Introduction*, 343. Neyrey, 83-84, asserts that the progression includes moving the woman from outsider to insider, transforming the space of the well to the private domain. This reaches beyond what we know of the cultural differentiation between public and private space and is based on seeing an invitation to belong to a group inherent in the text. The only clearly implied invitation is to believe, and despite Jesus' vindication of the woman there is no indication whether the tension from the disciples toward her was ever resolved. See also Boers, 157-158, for further discussion of the woman's progressive understanding.

<sup>52</sup>Schneiders, 38.

She surprises us with her answers and her strength. Her multi-dimensional emotional responses to Jesus, from defensiveness and suspicion to hope and joy are traits of a fully developed character ("round").<sup>53</sup> She is one of the roundest characters in the Bible, full of surprises and layered with history and personality.

The questions of whether she was an historical person, whether the story was historical, and whether she is representative of her people are tightly intertwined. Some point out that the Synoptics provide no collaborating evidence of Jesus having ministered in Samaria, but that still there was most likely a Samaritan population in the Johannine community.<sup>54</sup> On this basis, some assert that this story is probably more from the community's experience than from that of the historical Jesus.<sup>55</sup> However, Brown holds that the story is very likely rooted in a historical situation in Jesus' ministry. The Johannine author simply filled out the story to make it more dramatic.<sup>56</sup> Barrett holds that it is best to see the woman as a "traditional figure" handled symbolically by John.<sup>57</sup>

Whether she symbolizes the Samaritan people is discussed from many vantage points. Koester notes three techniques that can be interpreted in the Fourth Gospel as indicating a character who represents a group: the dialogue alternates between singular and plural (this is the major signal); there is a mention of the person's ancestors; and the

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<sup>53</sup>Fewell and Phillips, 26, say she is flat. Culpepper, 102, refers to E. M. Forster, who developed the theories of flat and round characters. The definition of a round character includes the ability to surprise, while a flat character is stereotypical and one-dimensional. I do not see any way to fit the Samaritan woman into the definition of a flat character.

<sup>54</sup>For instance, see R. Brown, *The Community*, 34-54.

<sup>55</sup>Schneiders, 39.

<sup>56</sup>R. Brown, *The Gospel*, A, 176.

<sup>57</sup>Barrett, 229. I believe an accurate interpretation of his stance is that she was part of a tradition, and the question of historicity is not answered for us.

person or situation reflects "the experiences of the Johannine community."<sup>58</sup> All of these signals are present in this narrative.

That she is representative is most clear early on in that she is not named.<sup>59</sup> This becomes even more evident later, when the conversation turns to worship and Jesus addresses her as a representative ("you" is plural in verse 22).<sup>60</sup>

As a representative of her people, the woman is often contrasted to Nicodemus. In comparing the two, we see points of contrast: woman/man, Samaritan/Jew, marginal/respected, Jesus came to her in the day/he came to Jesus in the night.<sup>61</sup> Nicodemus is a "stereotypical scribe," with no surprises (hence a "flat" character), while she experiences a range of emotions and responses.<sup>62</sup> This comparison seems to lead to a more secure assertion that the woman is representative of her people and those who come believe in Christ through his inclusive mission, while Nicodemus represents those who do not embrace full faith.

Further points of representation are those of Gentiles, outcasts, and women. This category of people represents those who were excluded from the worship of Yahweh or full participation in the fellowship of his people. Yet here, the representative comes to faith and fully participates in the mission of the Gospel by proclaiming that Jesus is present. Jesus invites her, with all her unusual characteristics, into relationship with him.

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<sup>58</sup>Craig R. Koester, "The Savior of the World': (John 4:42)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109 (1990), 670-671, 677. He does caution, however, to keep this view in perspective and not let it usurp the theme of the passage. There are no strong arguments against the woman as a representational figure.

<sup>59</sup>Koester, *Symbolism*, 48.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>62</sup>Schneiders, 38.

### Women and Other Marginals: Observations from This Text

This story requires us to note how many social and religious boundaries Jesus breaks as he has this interaction. First, there is an ethnic boundary. Jesus' request for water implies that he intended to drink from her jar, even though she was a Samaritan. Further, he accepted the Samaritans' invitation to stay with them.<sup>63</sup> Second, there is a boundary of propriety and morality - he is markedly ambivalent toward the sinful appearance of her life. Third, there is a gender barrier which she breaks by speaking to him and then (presumably) to other men about him.<sup>64</sup>

Neyrey notes the usefulness of her character to one of the major points of the passage:

Throughout the story, she violates cultural expectations for her society. But this intentionally and continually casts her in a deviant role as the most unlikely person on the cultural horizon to be welcomed into Jesus' kinship network. . . . This is the rhetorical point of the story. The gospel goes to unlikely people. . . .<sup>65</sup>

This dramatic presentation shows Jesus accepting and patiently guiding a sinner into his fellowship of believers. It sends a clear message that all are welcome within his community. The fullness of her character, her boldness and her stubbornness make her real enough that people who don't consider themselves "deviant" can still see themselves as within the realm of grace.

That she goes out and proclaims Jesus is generally accepted;<sup>66</sup> that she is commissioned to proclaim him is not. Neyrey notes that there are formal

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<sup>63</sup>Bruce 115.

<sup>64</sup>Neyrey, 86. See also Fewell and Phillips, 23.

<sup>65</sup>Neyrey, 88-89.

<sup>66</sup>For example, see Williamson, 886. He says she is also a disciple.



commissionings in John 20:25 and 21:15-18, and that the author could have used the formula here to make this a formal role but chose not to do so.<sup>67</sup> Her role is mediational, within the gossip network; she is useful in bringing people to Jesus but is not commissioned as an apostle.<sup>68</sup> The people's personal faith statement in verse 42 reinforces the "Johannine theology that all must come into personal contact with Jesus,"<sup>69</sup> which gives credence to her witness, whether formally commissioned or not.

Schneiders holds that the woman's witness is apostolic, based on the following facts: it results in those who hear coming to see Jesus; those people believed (see Jesus' prayer in 17:20 for those who will believe through the word of his people, which demonstrates the importance of the proclamation of believers to others); and the people come to complete faith independent of her witness (4:41-42) to become unmediated believers.<sup>70</sup>

However, if an apostle is one who personally encountered Jesus and was sent by him, this woman is an apostle on the first count but her initiative on the second disqualifies her. While her initiative discredits her apostleship, it does seem worthy of honor. The issue of whether she was commissioned is not, in the end, of primary importance in this narrative. (It will be of primary concern in chapter 5.)

What is important here is whether her witness was accepted. Given the discourse of Jesus on the harvest as an explanation of the coming conversion of the Samaritans and

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<sup>67</sup>Neyrey, 86. Neyrey also says that Mary Magdalene is commissioned in 20:11-17, but not for a public role. I disagree with this conclusion, as will be explained in Chapter 5 below.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 87-89.

<sup>69</sup>R. Brown, *Introduction*, 343.

<sup>70</sup>Schneiders, 39.

his acceptance of their invitation to stay with him, it appears that her witness was indeed acceptable to Jesus. The outcome certainly shows its effectiveness.<sup>71</sup>

This passage serves the purposes of the Gospel well, one of which is the revelation of Jesus as Messiah. Indeed, the point of the Fourth Gospel "is the saving revelation which takes place in Jesus. . . . [The story of the Samaritan woman] is remarkable for the clarity and completeness of its presentation of the revelation process in the Fourth Gospel."<sup>72</sup>

Boers sees a different theme in the story. For him, the point is that true worship takes place in a community comprised of all earthly divisions of humanity, "beyond all earthly religious communities, . . . a community of worship in which all of humanity is united."<sup>73</sup>

The witness of the townspeople is evidence of the prominence of this theme. That they called him the Savior of the world highlights his unifying mission. This title is associated with the Roman emperor, and has political undertones.<sup>74</sup>

This story begins like a betrothal scene and ends like a victorious political hero's welcome, in which people line the streets to greet the man and bring him into their town amid shouts of "savior" and "benefactor." By going out to meet Jesus on the road, inviting him into their town, and hailing him as the "Savior of the world," the people of Sychar witnessed to the universal scope of his power.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>Whether she is a disciple is yet another question. See Boers, 165. We have no explicit statement in the text that tells us she became a full believer herself, but her witness is taken by many as indication enough. "To bear witness...is the task of a disciple. The woman joins with John the Baptist as witness, and in fact precedes the apostles." Barrett, 243.

<sup>72</sup>Schneiders, 39.

<sup>73</sup>Boers 199-200. See also Barrett, 238; he holds that this idea of worship in spirit and truth is another purpose statement for the entire Fourth Gospel.

<sup>74</sup>Koester, *Symbolism*, 51. See also Koester, "'The Savior of the World'", 665.

<sup>75</sup>Koester, *Symbolism*, 51.

Thus, the woman's witness resulted in events with far-reaching implications.

Schneiders notes the importance of this passage to women believers:

In the history of exegesis and preaching a great deal has been made of this woman's irregular marital situation, very little of the clear indications of her apostleship, and virtually nothing of the vindication of her role against the implicit disapproval of the male members of the community. The importance of this scene for the contemporary discussion about the role of women is obvious enough. . . .<sup>76</sup>

We shall examine the "obvious" implications of the woman's witness and participation in the mission of Jesus in the concluding chapter. It must suffice for now to note that the woman received revelation ("I am") and responded with participation, witness and furthering both the mission of Jesus and the purpose of the Fourth Gospel.

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<sup>76</sup>Schneiders, 40.

## Chapter 4

### Martha and Mary: 11:1-44

The miracle recorded in chapter 11 of the Fourth Gospel is in itself especially important. It is the only resurrection miracle attested to in this Gospel. It has no parallel in the Synoptics. It is important for many reasons, not the least of which is its placement within the Gospel.

It is the final miracle in the Book of Signs. Many see it as the climax of this section of the Gospel because it is a glorious miracle.<sup>1</sup> Others attribute its climactic quality to its position as the seventh miracle of Jesus in this Gospel, and seven symbolizes perfection to Jews.<sup>2</sup>

Paschal refers to it as "the interpretive center of the Gospel. Lazarus' resurrection prepared the reader for the resurrection of Jesus and is the prototype for resurrection life promised all believers (11:21-27)."<sup>3</sup> The author of the Fourth Gospel uses this event as the reason Jewish leaders devised a plot to kill Jesus (see 11:54-57).

The immense value placed on this story calls for an examination of the question of its historicity. We will then consider the role of Martha in this passage and the significance of her conversation with Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup>R. Brown, *The Gospel*, 429. See also R. Brown, *Introduction*, 349; Bruce 249; R. W. Paschal Jr., "Lazarus," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 462; Grant R. Osborne, "Resurrection," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 677.

<sup>2</sup>Mark W. G. Stibbe, "A Tomb with a View: John 11.1-44 in Narrative-Critical Perspective," *New Testament Studies* 40 (January 1994), 39.

<sup>3</sup>Paschal, 462.

## Historicity

The main problem that arises in discussions of the historicity of this story is that it is missing from Synoptics. However, this in itself does not demand it be treated as fiction.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the Synoptic writers didn't know about it (they were more concerned with Galilee), or it was just one of several resurrections and they chose to use some of the others (Jairus' daughter, the widow's son).<sup>5</sup>

This story's absence from the Synoptics raises the question of whether John contains independent material. The rest of the Gospel demonstrates that much unique material is present, so arguing against the historicity of any of John's stories based on their absence from the Synoptics has been determined invalid.<sup>6</sup> Arguing against historicity also utilizes the logical fallacy of arguing from silence - the silence of the Synoptics.

Some assert that the historicity of the passage is impossible, because miracles do not happen. Barrett points out that this position is an *a priori*, against which no argument can succeed.<sup>7</sup>

Another objection to the historical accuracy of the account is that in the Fourth Gospel it is cited as the reason that the Jews seek to kill Jesus, but in Mark the reason is the cleansing of the Temple. From a literary perspective, though, the Fourth Gospel is structured in such a way as to heighten the drama of the story. Thus, its position may

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<sup>4</sup>Barrett, 388-389.

<sup>5</sup>Paschal, 642.

<sup>6</sup>R. Brown, *The Gospel*, A, 428.

<sup>7</sup>Barrett, 388.

very well be a choice by the author within that person's dramatic writing plan.<sup>8</sup> Mark's author had other purposes and may also have made literary choices to support those goals, without commenting on the historicity of any events.

Some scholars suggest that the story may be historical if there really was a Lazarus. Further, some suggest that Lazarus could be the Beloved Disciple. Evidence for this is circumstantial: he and his sisters are described as being loved by Jesus (hence, "beloved"); Lazarus' home in Bethany would explain the orientation of the Gospel being from Jerusalem and Judea; Jesus' words to Martha about the future and then Lazarus' resurrection might explain the expectation that the Beloved Disciple would not die (11:25-26; 21:3); and, Lazarus being the reason that many Jews believed in Jesus could be a veiled reference to a community founded by Lazarus. If Lazarus was the Beloved Disciple, that would also explain the importance given to this miracle, when the Synoptics do not even record it.<sup>9</sup> However well-presented the case may be, there is no conclusive evidence. Paschal sees Lazarus as an idealized figure, along with the Beloved Disciple, but not the same as the Beloved Disciple.<sup>10</sup> This seems reasonable given the author's frequent use of representative characters.

Barrett points to an ancient record, *Tradition*, 229, in which a man named Lazarus was raised from the dead and yet people did not come to faith.<sup>11</sup> R. Brown also notes that the names of Mary, Martha and Lazarus have been found together on a tomb outside

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid. See also R. Brown, *The Gospel*, A, 429.

<sup>9</sup>Paschal, 462. Paschal refers to J. N. Sanders and others.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid. Paschal sees Lazarus as historical, but idealized in order to serve a purpose of showing "the future of the disciples as those who will be given resurrection life and are given eternal life now."

<sup>11</sup>Barrett, 389.

Bethany.<sup>12</sup> However, Barrett also points out that the only certain answer to whether anything in John's Gospel is historical will come from either the person who says miracles are not possible or the person who says everything in the Bible literally happened in the way it was recorded.<sup>13</sup> Thus, we are cautioned against making too much or too little of the question.

Given the arguments for and against historicity on any and all levels, it appears that it is best to view the event as having historical roots and historical characters, and to hold the details of the story in a delicate balance of respect and openness. We will proceed from this point assuming the following: 1. Miracles, including resurrections, are possible. 2. The resurrection of Lazarus and the events surrounding it as we have them in the Fourth Gospel are a dramatic interpretation of historical events. 3. The historicity of the account is not the primary criterion for judging the value of the passage and the lessons it conveys. Rather, the primary criterion is its inclusion in the canon of Scripture, which is authoritative.

### **The Passage**

The opening introduces Lazarus as the brother of Mary and Martha (verses 1 and 2). This identification of the man by his relationship to women is the opposite of what was customary.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>R. Brown, *The Gospel*, A, 431.

<sup>13</sup>Barrett, 389.

<sup>14</sup>Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger, "Mary of Bethany and Mary of Magdala - Two Female Characters in the Johannine Passion Narrative: A Feminist, Narrative-Critical Reader-Response," *New Testament Studies* 41 (October 1995), 572.

Someone delivers a message to Jesus, saying that his friend Lazarus is ill. Jesus says this illness is an opportunity for people to see God's glory. In spite of Jesus' love for his friends, he stays where he is for two more days.

When he decides to begin his journey, a debate occurs between Jesus and his disciples regarding whether he should return to Judea (verses 7-10). Barrett refers to Brown's note that this section is not related to the Lazarus miracle.<sup>15</sup> However, this section is reminiscent of Jesus' discourse with his disciples in the middle of the story of the Samaritan woman (4:31-38). It seems that this also could be an internal commentary, rather than simply unrelated.

We see another illustration of misunderstanding in verses 11 and 12. In this instance, the disciples misunderstand Jesus' use of "sleep" as a metaphor for death.<sup>16</sup> We will encounter another misunderstanding later in the text.

We learn in verse 17 that, when Jesus arrives, Lazarus has already been dead four days. Given that Bethany was only a two-mile journey, Lazarus had to have died before Jesus was told about his illness.<sup>17</sup> Jesus supernaturally knew of Lazarus' death in verse 11, which implies the power of his choice in the timing of the events and emphasizes his plan to reveal God's glory. Additionally, by including the detail that Lazarus had been dead four days, the author confirms to the reader that the man was truly dead.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Barrett, 391.

<sup>16</sup>Barrett, 392. In R. Brown, *The Gospel*, A, 423 he points to Bultmann, p. 304, who says this is not misunderstanding because of Bultmann's narrow definition of the term, which requires confusion of the heavenly and earthly. Brown disagrees with that conclusion here, as does this writer.

<sup>17</sup>Kitzberger 573.

<sup>18</sup>R. Brown, *The Gospel*, A, 424. See also Bruce, 243: The rabbis seem to have taught later that the soul visited the tomb the first three days; after that, it left permanently and the "death was then irreversible." The thought may have existed at the time of this story.



As Jesus approaches Bethany, word reaches Martha that he is coming. She goes out to meet him along the road. Her opening words are of faith: if he had been there, Lazarus would not have died.<sup>19</sup> These words convey honest disappointment, and perhaps frustration with Jesus, implying the closeness of their relationship. Kitzberger notes further distinctives in this dialogue:

. . . a rabbi normally does not talk to a woman in public. Furthermore, this conversation is a *theological and intellectual talk* about Lazarus' resurrection. Jesus reveals himself as "the resurrection" and "the life." The conversation culminates in *Martha's confession* that *Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, i.e. "the anointed one,"* and that he is the Son of God who is coming into the world (v. 27).<sup>20</sup>

This confession in verse 27 is important. Martha believes that Jesus is the Messiah, but does not understand the full implication of his identity.<sup>21</sup> Hers is the first explicit confession of Jesus as Messiah in John.<sup>22</sup> In fact, "the most important role of discipleship according to Johannine theology, that of proclamation of Jesus' true identity, is given to a woman."<sup>23</sup> Her words in verse 27 are reminiscent of 1:9, where the true light is "coming into the world."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, this is an instance of witness to Jesus within the Fourth

<sup>19</sup>Bruce, 243.

<sup>20</sup>Kitzberger, 574, emphasis hers.

<sup>21</sup>Bruce, 245. Belief in resurrection was common by Jesus' day, due to the influence of the Pharisees. Bruce, 242-3; Barrett, 395. The meaning of "even now" in verse 22 is disputed, but verse 39 clarifies that Martha did not expect that Lazarus would be resuscitated. R. Brown, *The Gospel*, A, 433-434. See also Barrett, 397.

<sup>22</sup>Martha joins the men's christological expressions from chapter 1 (John the Baptist, 1:29-34; Nathaniel, 1:49). Those statements are clear indications of Jesus' messiahship, but are not explicit statements or proclamations of him as such. This is the first absolutely clear attribution of the title to Jesus in John.

<sup>23</sup>Tetlow, *Woman and Ministry*, 111, quoted by Grant Osborne, "Women in Jesus' Ministry." *Westminster Theological Journal* 51 (Fall 1989), 286. However, Peter's confession of Jesus as the Holy One of God (Luke 9:20) is, for all practical purposes, parallel. Williamson, 883. Matthew 16:16 is a direct parallel from Peter's mouth. R. Brown, *The Gospel*, A, 425.

<sup>24</sup>Barrett, 397.

Gospel, and it is in the mouth of a woman. Her confession could even be an early form of a creed, used later by the church.<sup>25</sup> Martha's belief is clear, in spite of Lazarus' death.<sup>26</sup> Jesus leads her to an even deeper faith.<sup>27</sup>

In this dialogue, a basic tenet of the Christian view of death comes from the lips of Jesus. He says in verse 25 that those who die will live.<sup>28</sup> While Martha does not seem to grasp the significance of this, it becomes clear to both her and the reader.

Martha exits the scene and sends Mary in. She greets Jesus in the same manner her sister had. She kneels at his feet and confesses her belief that he could have saved her brother from death. She questions why he did not come and help. Mary does not continue on to a confession of him as Messiah.

Mary's shorter role and lack of a messianic confession pushes Martha to the center of the story. Martha actually plays the lead opposite Jesus in this scene.<sup>29</sup> Thus, we shall minimize Mary's role and continue to focus on Jesus and Martha.

Verses 33 and 38 tell us that Jesus had a deep emotional response to the weeping

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<sup>25</sup>Barrett, 397.

<sup>26</sup>Schneiders, 41. Martha's confession is pre-resurrection.

<sup>27</sup>R. Brown, *Introduction*, 349.

<sup>28</sup>See R. Brown, *The Gospel*, A, 425.

<sup>29</sup>Schneiders, 40. This, however, is debated. R. Brown, *The Gospel*, A, 433 cites Bultmann and Wilkins, who say Martha's discussion with Jesus was a later addition. They make this assertion based on the highly developed Johannine theology present. However, Martha is the lesser known of two (verse 2 appeals to a tradition well enough known that the author can simply refer to it here and recount it later). Given this, why would an author reduce the role of a person already familiar to the audience? Rather, it seems more sensible that Mary's conversation with Jesus was added later, so that she would be included in the story. Further, Mary's repetition of Martha's greeting and her limited function of introducing the Jews who witness the resurrection and report him to the leaders both point to the subordination of her role to that of Martha's. See also Kitzberger, 578.

of the people.<sup>30</sup> Verse 35 tells us that Jesus himself wept over the death of his friend.

This emotion, combined with the sisters' openness with him, the mention of his love for Lazarus in verses 3 and 36, and his deep conversation with Martha in the open public space of the road are indicators of the sisters' preexisting intimate relationship with him.

Verse 39 re-introduces Martha, this time as the sister of the dead man (as opposed to Lazarus being the brother of Mary and her sister Martha in v. 1). This introduction seems odd, but it is typical of John to reintroduce characters upon their re-entry to the narrative.<sup>31</sup> Jesus instructs the people to remove the stone. Martha protests, reminding him of the smell of a body that has been dead for four days. The last words that Jesus directs to Martha are, "Didn't I assure you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" (verse 40). Martha had not understood his earlier revelation of himself as the resurrection and the life.<sup>32</sup> She was still standing at the tomb, unaware that Jesus intended to restore life to her brother. Yet, he did. We read a brief report in verse 45 that many of the Jews who were present believed in Jesus (v. 45), and it seems reasonable to assume that the sisters are included. Thus, Martha's belief and understanding are brought to fullness.

This text illustrates that Jesus is the life, again a reference to the Prologue

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<sup>30</sup>The exact content of his emotion is debated. See Barrett, 398-399. See also R. Brown, *The Gospel*, A, 425, 426, 435. Jesus' response is attributed to anger at the lack of faith among those present, or at the hold of sin and death on humankind, or at the involvement of Satan in the suffering of people.

<sup>31</sup>For instance, Andrew is introduced as Simon Peter's brother in 1:40 and again in 6:8; Lazarus is introduced in chapter 11 and in 12:1 the reader is reminded that he is the one Jesus raised from the dead. See also R. Brown, *The Gospel*, A, 426.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 433.

(1:3-4).<sup>33</sup> It is an occasion of revelation, which, like that to the Samaritan, causes a woman to grow in her understanding of Jesus' identity.<sup>34</sup>

### **Summarizing the Martha Text**

This text, like the rest of the Fourth Gospel, is written for the purpose of encouraging belief in Jesus as the Messiah. Its own purpose, expressed in verse 4, is to serve as an occasion for the glory of God to be manifest, which serves the larger purpose of the book.

Martha's confession in verse 27 represents her best ability to understand the person of Jesus. While it is incomplete, it is sincere in its devotion. Osborne notes,

. . . the narrative flow presents the two women's interaction as culminating the Christological expression of John's Gospel to that point and as the high point of discipleship understanding, preparing for Thomas' final Christological exclamation of 20:28, My Lord and my God!<sup>35</sup>

That this type of culmination would be placed on the lips of a woman is remarkable, considering that women of the time were not acceptable witnesses. Would it not have been important to the author of the Fourth Gospel to feature credible witnesses? The author's choice of a woman as the first voice explicitly proclaiming the messiahship of Jesus implies the intended readers were somewhat familiar with women functioning as his witnesses.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 430.

<sup>34</sup> Stibbe, 46-47.

<sup>35</sup> Osborne, "Women," 286.

## Chapter 5

### Mary Magdalene: 20:1-18

Among the most important elements of Christian faith is the resurrection of Jesus. It is the point at which Jesus' glory reaches its dramatic climax. In the Fourth Gospel, it is the moment when the two major emphases of the book converge: glory and salvation meet mission and discipleship.<sup>1</sup>

Traditions regarding this event are in two forms: his appearances and the discovery of the empty tomb. In the Fourth Gospel, the two are combined in one story.<sup>2</sup> Chapter 20 provides the reader with glimpses into the encounters disciples had with the risen Jesus. Mary Magdalene and Thomas are bookends for this text, the point of which is Jesus commissioning the disciples and promising the Spirit.<sup>3</sup> Here, both Mary Magdalene and Thomas encounter Jesus and misunderstand his presence, but come to faith. In addition, we learn of Peter's participation and the faith of the Beloved Disciple at the empty tomb; but the text does not afford either of them a place of prominence in this narrative.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Osborne, *Resurrection*, 684.

<sup>2</sup>Barrett, 560.

<sup>3</sup>Dorothy A. Lee, "Partnership in Easter Faith: The Role of Mary Magdalene and Thomas in John 20," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 58 (June 1995), 38-39.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 39-40.

## The Passage

This scene is not written as clearly as one may desire.<sup>5</sup> However, these difficulties are not the stumbling blocks some would make them out to be. We shall examine the text and any difficulties relevant to this thesis in the order in which we find them in the Gospel.

Mary is alone at the tomb in verse 1, but in verse 2 she uses the plural in her report to the disciples. This implies that others were with her,<sup>6</sup> or that she is representative of other women (see chapter 3 above). If other women are present, John is particularly interested in her story and does not bother to even name the others - which helps to focus the attention on her.

Her report to the disciples is one of misunderstanding, a typical Johannine technique. She has seen that the stone has been moved from the tomb, and she assumes that Jesus' body has been stolen. Her misunderstanding occurs while it is still dark (verse 1), which makes use of another technique characteristic of the Fourth Gospel, the dualism of light and darkness. This reference to darkness serves to further emphasize her misunderstanding.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>R. Brown, *The Gospel*, B, 995-996, gives the most comprehensive overview of the literary difficulties in 20:1-18: Mary is alone but uses "we" in verse 2; in verse 2, Mary assumes Jesus' body is stolen but she doesn't actually look into the tomb until verse 11; when Peter and the Beloved Disciple are at the tomb, there are some grammatical problems: verse 2 contains two "to"s; verse 3 uses "went out" and "coming"; verses 5 and 6 repeat what was seen; verse 8 says they believed but in verse 9 they do not understand; the Beloved Disciple believes but evidently tells no one; in verse 11, Mary has returned to the tomb but we are not told when she did so; in 12, Mary does not see the burial clothes but does see angels - unlike the two earlier disciples on both counts; the angels don't provide any help to Mary; she turns to Jesus twice, in 14 and 16. Brown believes these inconsistencies are due to the process of editing material from multiple sources.

<sup>6</sup>Bruce, 384. See also Osborne, *Women*, 287.

<sup>7</sup>Osborne, *Resurrection*, 684.

The scene shifts from Mary Magdalene to Peter and the Beloved Disciple, and their race to the tomb. They look into the tomb and notice the grave clothes lying on the bench where Jesus' body had lay. We are told the Beloved Disciple "believed", though we are not told what he believed. Scholars take it to mean that he believed Jesus had risen, but verse 9 tells us that these disciples still did not understand that Jesus would be resurrected. This statement and the note in verse 10 that they then went home seems to indicate that he merely believed Jesus' body was gone.<sup>8</sup>

In verse 11 we are back at the tomb with Mary. This time, she looks into the tomb and sees angels sitting where Jesus' head and feet had been. The angels simply ask why she is crying. The angels are not revelators, but Jesus himself will be.<sup>9</sup> She answers the angels with the same information she gave to the other disciples. As soon as she is finished saying this, she turns and faces a man who asks essentially the same question. This repetition of question/answer increases the tension in the story.<sup>10</sup>

The text tells us that Mary assumes this man is a gardener, and she proceeds as though he might have personally moved the body. She does not recognize the man to whom she speaks. Again, she misunderstands - for this man is Jesus. He responds

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<sup>8</sup>There is considerable disagreement on this. For instance, R. Brown, *The Gospel*, B, 987 notes that for the Beloved Disciple to be introduced to this scene for such a "trite" reason as to verify the body was missing is odd at best. It is not entirely unreasonable to see his "belief" as referring to Jesus' resurrection, because there is no explicit report of the Beloved Disciple's resurrection belief later in the passage. However, to use a trustworthy character such as the Beloved Disciple as another witness to establish that Jesus' body was missing is not surprising in the Fourth Gospel's witness motif. Most importantly, we cannot escape the fact that the text does not tell us what he believed. Since we have not been introduced to the resurrected Jesus by verse 8, it seems like an imposition on the text to assume that the Beloved Disciple believed Jesus was alive. Again, we must look at verse 9. The least imposing interpretation is that he believed the body was gone.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, 685. See also R. Brown, *Introduction*, 359.

<sup>10</sup>Osborne, *Resurrection*, 685.

simply by saying her name, "Mary!," which breaks through her misunderstanding and she is moved to full faith.

Much has been written about Jesus' use of her name to help her see the revelation in front of her. It is the fulfillment of John 10:3, 14, 27, in which Jesus says he is the Good Shepherd; his sheep will know his voice, and he knows their names.<sup>11</sup>

She responds dramatically. She grasps him and clings to him, calling him in Aramaic *Rabbouni*. This section is reminiscent of Jesus' question to John the Baptist's disciples in 1:38, "What are you looking for?" and their response, which included calling him Rabbi.<sup>12</sup> The use of this title is not nearly as clear a confession as Thomas makes later in verse 28; it is perhaps emphatic and respectful.<sup>13</sup>

Her physical actions have received more attention from scholars than her words to Jesus. In verse 17 he tells her to not cling to him, because he has not yet ascended to the Father. The meaning of the phrase, "because I have not yet ascended," has provoked much debate. Brown notes that, unfortunately, more scholarly comment has focused on Jesus' instructions that she not hold onto him rather than on the reference to his ascension, which will be the means whereby Jesus will establish a new relationship with his disciples.<sup>14</sup> Indeed,

Magdalene is trying to hold on to the source of her joy, since she mistakes an appearance of the risen Jesus for his permanent presence with his disciples. In telling her not to hold on to him, Jesus indicates that his permanent presence is not

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<sup>11</sup>For example, see R. Brown, *The Gospel*, B, 1009.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 1010.

<sup>13</sup>Bruce, 389.

<sup>14</sup>R. Brown, *The Gospel*, B, 1011.



by way of appearance, but by way of this gift of the Spirit that can come only after he has ascended to the Father.<sup>15</sup>

Brown refers to a basic tenet of New Testament theology that the post-resurrection Jesus was with God and possessed eternal life. His appearances at that point are from heaven.<sup>16</sup>

This answer also silences the thought that, because Jesus appeared to Mary and said he was not yet ascended, he was actually not yet glorified and she was given an inferior appearance. This position dismisses John's writing style and technique. Mary proclaims, just like the others, that she has seen the Lord (verses 18, 25). The emphasis here is on the temporary nature of his presence in post-resurrection time, until the Spirit is given as permanent presence.<sup>17</sup>

Jesus concludes his words to her with instructions to tell his "brothers" that he is risen. This familial reference is new in the relationship between Jesus and the disciples, and reflects the transformation of their relationship.<sup>18</sup>

### **Interpreting the Passage**

There are several points in this text which are significant to this study. That Mary Magdalene is the first (or among the first) to see the risen Jesus is reported in John, Matthew 28: 9-10 and Mark 16:9-11. Peter is first in Paul (1 Cor 15:3-8) and in Luke 24:34. The Mark passage is an appendix and not considered an independent

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 1012. Bruce seems to agree, 390.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 1013. Barrett, 566, disagrees.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, 1014-1015.

<sup>18</sup> This is commonly held by scholars. For example, see Bruce, 390.

account. Matthew and John, however, are considered independent. This is good evidence that it is a reliable tradition.<sup>19</sup>

Mary's encounter with the risen Lord has often been minimized as a private appearance rather than public.<sup>20</sup> If the "we" of John 20:2 is taken to mean that others were present though unnamed, and the presence of these same people continues in verses 11-18, it is not a private appearance. If the "we" indicates representation, the author purposely showed the risen Jesus interacting with women and the representative nature of the section negates charges of a limited, private appearance. Thus, regardless of the interpretation of the "we," its presence prevents the interpretation of limitation based on privacy. In the Matthean account, there is at least one other woman present. To diminish the John scene to the position of an inferior appearance seems without foundation in the passage.

That Mary at first misunderstands Jesus' disappearance and then identity, then recognizes the christophany she experiences demonstrates the progression of faith for all disciples, of all times. Her faith moves, as Osborne puts it, "from unbelief to understanding to mission."<sup>21</sup> It is this involvement in mission which we shall consider next.

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<sup>19</sup>Schneiders, 43. O'Collins and Kendall, 645, also present a strong argument for the existence of two accounts. They remind us to acknowledge the historical aversion to accepting the witness of women.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Osborne, "Women," 287.

## Apostolic Commission

That Mary Magdalene was instructed by the risen Jesus to proclaim his resurrection is not generally doubted. The nature of this instruction has been debated, but the text itself concludes Mary Magdalene was not only the first to interact with the risen Jesus, but was the first to be commissioned by him as an apostle. Jesus tells her, "Go to my brothers and say to them. . . " (v. 17). She is thus an apostle to the apostles, a missionary to the men.<sup>22</sup>

Further, Mary's encounter with Jesus is a "protophany" (first christophany), and this is important in assigning preeminence to an apostle.<sup>23</sup> The text strongly supports this conclusion. New familial references are included in the news she is to proclaim and this allows her to be the first to explain to the community the significance of Christ's death and resurrection: now, they are all children of God, as promised in 1:12.<sup>24</sup> In the Johannine context of community, it appears that Mary Magdalene is the first member of a new community<sup>25</sup> - or at least a prominent founding member. Her role as missionary to the others is the conclusive evidence.

Many traditions in the early centuries attested to the significance of Mary Magdalene in the history of the Church. Pope Leo the Great, soon after the Council of Chalcedon, called her a "figure of the Church". Pope Gregory the Great referred to her 100 years later as another Eve who announces life, not death. Prior to these two,

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<sup>22</sup>Kitzberger, 583-584. See also Schneiders, 43; Osborne, "Women," 287. Stagg, 201, acknowledges her commission by Christ but stops short of calling her an apostle.

<sup>23</sup>Schneiders, 43.

<sup>24</sup>This is an example of "inclusion" (using the same idea as bookends at the beginning and end of a passage) as discussed in chapter 1 above.

<sup>25</sup>Lee, 45-46.

Hippolytus of Rome (third century) referred to the women at the tomb of Jesus as "apostles". Mary Magdalene was thus often called the *apostola apostolorum*.<sup>26</sup>

## Theology

Much important theology is present in this account. The reference in verse 17 to the new family relationship between Jesus and his disciples and the intimacy this implies is reminiscent of John 1:12, ". . . Jesus has empowered those who believe in him to become God's children."<sup>27</sup> R. Brown notes, "In typical Johannine outlook, these two scenes at the tomb relate resurrection faith to intimacy with Jesus. . . ." <sup>28</sup> Two elements of classic Johannine theology are fully developed here. First, the connection between seeing and believing is demonstrated. Secondly, Jesus' ascent to the Father is more clearly communicated here than elsewhere.<sup>29</sup>

In determining the role of women in the church, which we shall examine more thoroughly in the next chapter, the importance of John 20:1-18 cannot be underestimated. Schneiders notes it is

. . . perhaps the most important indication we have of the Gospel perspective on the role of women in the Christian community. It shows us quite clearly that, in at least one of the first Christian communities, a woman was regarded as the primary witness to the paschal mystery, the guarantee of the apostolic tradition. Her claim to apostleship is equal in every respect to both Peter's and Paul's, and we know more about her exercise of her vocation than we do about most of the members of

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<sup>26</sup>O'Collins and Kendall, 632; see Leo the Great, *De ascensione Domini* serm 2,3 (SC 74, 141, 42); Gregory the Great, *De apparitione Christi Magdalenae facta* 189; Hippolytus of Rome, *De Cantico* 24-26 (CSCO 264, 43-49).

<sup>27</sup>R. Brown, *Introduction*, 359.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup>Barrett, 561.

the Twelve....she saw the risen Lord, received directly from him the commission to preach the Gospel, and carried out that commission faithfully and effectively.<sup>30</sup>

Regardless of the accuracy of the community hypothesis, the precedent for women to participate and serve in the church and its mission equally with men is established by this passage.

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<sup>30</sup>Schneiders, 44.

## Chapter 6 Analyses and Conclusions

The three passages we have studied contain parallels and points of contrast. Each provides evidence of counter-cultural behavior, introducing the possibility for new norms within a new community. Some questions remain, but some seem to be clearly answered. We shall now note the lessons found in these stories.

### Continuity Between All Three Stories

There are several points of continuity between the three scenes and characters. These parallels include misunderstanding, witness/proclamation, revelation, obedience to Jesus' direction, unconventional characteristics shared by the women, and implications regarding the theology and practice of the Johannine community.

#### Misunderstanding and Faith

All three women begin their interaction with Jesus in a state of misunderstanding, which is a common literary technique in the Fourth Gospel. The Samaritan woman misunderstands Jesus' reference to living water; Martha misunderstands Jesus' self-identification as the resurrection and the life; Mary Magdalene misunderstands Jesus' very presence. These misunderstandings are balanced by the women's willingness to believe.<sup>1</sup> The Samaritan woman, while we do not hear her make a full confession of Jesus as the Messiah, does open the possibility of his identity. Martha confesses her belief that Jesus is the Messiah, in spite of her incomplete understanding even at that point. Mary Magdalene recognizes Jesus and acknowledges his resurrection. For two of

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<sup>1</sup> Lee, 41. She notes this parallel between Martha and Mary Magdalene, but it is apparent with the Samaritan woman as well.

these scenes, those involving the Samaritan woman and Mary Magdalene, the women's faith leads to proclamation.

### Witness/Proclamation

Mary Magdalene as witness is incontrovertible. Jesus commissions her to take to the "brothers" the message of his resurrection and their new relationship with him, and she does so.

The Samaritan woman returns to her village and tells people to come meet Jesus, which they do. She raises the possibility that he could be the Messiah. While she does not proclaim him as such, she does plant the idea in the minds of others and leads them to meet Jesus for themselves. The resulting belief of the people establishes the Samaritan woman as a witness to Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Jesus' comments to the disciples regarding the harvest while the woman is telling her neighbors about him (literally gathering the harvest) is further evidence of her participation in his mission.

Martha is less clear in this regard. She simply informs her sister that Jesus has arrived, rather than witnessing to Jesus' identity.<sup>3</sup> Some see her invitation to Mary to go see Jesus as a "witness,"<sup>4</sup> but the texts do not seem to support a direct correlation between her activities and that of Mary Magdalene or the Samaritan. In Martha's case, there is no resulting belief, no carrying of revelation or possible revelation. Martha does not appear to be a witness.

In John, this role of witness is central. Trites notes,

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<sup>2</sup>Kitzberger, 583, agrees.

<sup>3</sup>Neyrey, 87. There is scholarly attestation to a correlation between the witness and proclamation role of the Samaritan woman and Mary, however.

<sup>4</sup>Stibbe, 47.

John follows rather closely the formal pattern of the covenant lawsuit which is worked out in detail in Isaiah 43-48. There God has a lawsuit with his people and takes them to court, calling witnesses and laying charges against them. In John, God incarnate in Jesus has a controversy with the world as it is incarnate in 'the Jews,' the Jewish leaders who epitomize the world in its opposition to the Gospel (Jn 5:16, 18; 6:41; 7:1; 10:31; 11:8).<sup>5</sup>

Thus, this role as witness is crucial in the overall purpose of the Gospel, as we saw in chapter 1. The Samaritan woman and Mary Magdalene both serve as major contributors to the development of this theme and to the fulfillment of this objective.

### Revelation

The women's faith and proclamation is based on revelation. Jesus reveals himself to the Samaritan woman as "I am," the Messiah. He reveals himself as the risen savior to Mary Magdalene and announces to her the establishment of a new relationship between himself and his disciples. These revelations are the source of the women's proclamations to others.

Martha also received revelation. Jesus reveals to her that he is the resurrection and the life. While she does not share with others this revelation or her belief that he is the Messiah she nonetheless receives special revelation from the mouth of Jesus concerning his identity. This demonstrates that women are "recipients of three of Jesus' most important self-revelations: his messiahship, that he is the resurrection and the life, and that his glorification is complete and its salvific effects given to his disciples."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Trites, 879.

<sup>6</sup>Schneiders, 44.



### Obedience

The obvious expression of obedience is with Mary, who obeys Jesus' instructions to go tell his brothers that he is alive, and that his God is their God. However, 11:39-41 imply that Martha also obeyed.

In this section, Jesus instructs the people at Lazarus' grave to remove the stone blocking the entrance. Martha objects, because the decomposed body would emit a horrendous odor. Jesus reminds her that he has other purposes, and the stone is removed. This implies that Martha acquiesced. These women submit to the direction of Jesus.<sup>7</sup> This is an example to those who would be disciples of Jesus.

### Unconventional Characteristics

Perhaps one of the most remarkable parallels between these stories is the unusual character of the women we encounter in these passages. They are counter-cultural on many levels.

These women all act independently of a husband<sup>8</sup> (or father). Rather, they relate directly to Jesus, never requiring a male mediator.<sup>9</sup> Mary Magdalene demonstrates her independence by being in a garden alone in the dark, asking a strange man questions, and bearing apostolic witness.<sup>10</sup> She is a realistic, believable character: she is tough,

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<sup>7</sup>Neyrey, 87. He notes the Samaritan woman's quasi-obedience, but since she received no explicit instruction from Jesus, she is omitted here.

<sup>8</sup>Boers, 171.

<sup>9</sup>Schneiders, 39.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 38.

devoted, and desperate.<sup>11</sup> Her willingness to get the body of Jesus and take care of it shows initiative and financial resource.<sup>12</sup>

These characteristics stand in stark contrast to what would be expected of women in that cultural setting. That they would interact with Jesus in public space is unusual. That Jesus would initiate this contact with solitary women outside their homes demonstrates his participation in these counter-cultural relationships. These women engage Jesus in theological conversation. They do not limit themselves to a role or place assigned by anyone other than Jesus. They are "highly individual and original women whose place is wherever Jesus calls them and whose role is whatever their love for him suggests or his desires for them indicate, however unconventional."<sup>13</sup> Some argue that Jesus sends the women to the private sphere to proclaim him: Mary to the "brothers," i.e., family; he sends the Samaritan woman to call her husband.<sup>14</sup> However, that the Samaritan goes to the town to tell people to come to Jesus is overlooked in this view. She goes directly to the public sphere, not home.

More importantly, Mary is sent to be an apostle to the male apostles (unrelated to her). That she is the first to encounter the risen Jesus is significant. Likewise, those who project onto Peter apostolic prominence cite his protophany as reported by Paul.<sup>15</sup> If this is evidence of prominence for Peter, it must logically also demonstrate prominence for

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Bruce, 388.

<sup>13</sup>Schneiders, 39.

<sup>14</sup>Neyrey, 87.

<sup>15</sup>Schneiders, 44 notes this commonly used formula.

Mary Magdalene. Her prominence is unique in her cultural context, and this is greatly compounded by the fact that the recipients of her proclamation are men.

These unique qualities - independence, direct communication with Jesus, initiative in public duties - are common among all the women characters in the Fourth Gospel. They are multi-dimensional characters who do not fit within stereotypes. The author presents women "positively and in intimate relation to Jesus. No woman is shown as resisting Jesus' initiatives, failing to believe, deserting him, or betraying him. This is in sharp contrast to John's presentation of men. . . ."<sup>16</sup>

#### Implications Regarding the Theology and Practice of the Johannine Community

These characters give insight into the operative theology in the Johannine community. The women are generally so unconventional that they "suggest that the Christian women of John's experience were not uneducated domestic recluses."<sup>17</sup> Even if the characters in the Gospel are not strictly historical, Schneiders asserts there is a great likelihood that "real women, actually engaged in theological discussion, competently proclaiming the Gospel, publicly confessing their faith, and serving at the table of the Lord, stand behind these Johannine characters."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Schneiders, 38. Schneiders notes that men in the Fourth Gospel "are frequently presented as vain (13:37), hypocritical (12:4-6), fickle (13:38; 16:31-32), obtuse (3:10; 16:18), deliberately unbelieving (9:24-41; 20:24-25), or thoroughly evil (13:2, 27-30)." However, one must note that the Samaritan woman does resist Jesus for a while, but he is persistent and breaks through her hesitation and suspicion. In this case, she is defensive because *Jesus* is being so counter-cultural. Regarding the full development of female characters as compared to the more "flat" males, Schneiders rightly compares Nicodemus to the Samaritan woman, Lazarus to Mary and Martha, and the male disciples (except Thomas) to Mary Magdalene.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 38.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

R. Brown notes that inferring specific details about the community behind the Gospel on the basis of the Gospel itself is difficult at best.<sup>19</sup> However, he also notes, "Since the presentation of Jesus and his message is of primary interest, the deeds and words of Jesus are included in the Gospels because the evangelist sees that they are (or have been) useful to the members of his community."<sup>20</sup> Thus Jesus' actions provide at least a hint at Johannine community life. The Jesus we encounter in the Fourth Gospel is one who purposefully includes women in his life and mission by revealing his identity to them in personal and supernatural ways. This presentation of Jesus, regardless of what the "community" thought of it, is still counter-cultural and demands response.

In John, Jesus approves of and facilitates the participation of women in his mission. Even more important is the presentation of Jesus directly calling to women to come to him, believe, and proclaim. J. Brown notes,

Jesus violated all rabbinical teaching regarding the treatment of women. He went out of His way to include them and to elevate them in ways that were absolutely amazing to the people of His day. He also cut across all cultural convention in His treatment of Samaritans and Gentiles.<sup>21</sup>

Some have questioned the full participation of women on the basis of Jesus' disciples all being male. J. Brown continues her comments to address this issue:

But He did not select a Samaritan, a Gentile, or a woman to serve as one of the twelve disciples. Doing so would have made it impossible to reach those He was sent to reach first, the people of the old covenant. . . .<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>R. Brown, *The Community*, 18.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>J. Brown, 127-128.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

## Application

This view of Jesus and his call to women begs for application by the contemporary disciple. “That women were present at all in Christ’s ministry was a radical departure from the norms of the day.”<sup>23</sup> His interactions with women, and the assertiveness with which he approached them “can only be interpreted as a deliberate attempt on the part of the Son of God to change how His people would view and treat women from that day forward.”<sup>24</sup> That men and women have an equal role in Jesus’ mission is revolutionary.

The contemporary Christian community is called to examine these texts. The christological confession of Martha and the apostleship of Mary Magdalene clamor for attention. The logical result of recognizing the Samaritan’s role and Jesus’ validation of it, the confession of Martha and the proclamation of Mary would be an acknowledgment of the propriety of women’s full and equal involvement in the life, worship and mission of the community of Christ.

It is telling that the Fourth Gospel includes for us a glimpse into the controversy of this issue even among the Twelve. In 4:27, the disciples are shocked at Jesus’ interactions with a woman, but do not dare to ask him, “Why are you speaking with her?” R. Brown notes, “That may well be a question whose time has come in the church of Jesus Christ.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 129.

<sup>24</sup>Osborne, “Women,” 287.

<sup>25</sup>R. Brown, *The Community*, 198.

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