



TEXTS IN DIALOGUE

JOHN 4:1-26 – JESUS AND THE SAMARITAN WOMAN

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In the Hebrew Bible, meetings at a well are usually significant. They mean marriage. The well was the community centre, the place where women could meet and exchange gossip. It seems it was often the task of the younger women – the daughters of the household – to go and fetch the water. Consequently it was also the place where men would go to watch them.

There are three stories of love and marriage that take place at a well in the Torah and two others that use the symbolism and develop the theme in ways that the writer of John's Gospel also uses in this passage so rich in allusion.

The Samaritan woman meets at 'Jacob's well,' which reminds us that Jacob met Rachel at a well (Genesis 29). The consequence of this meeting is two marriages – Rachel and Leah – and the birth of 12 sons – the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham. But first we have tales of Rachel's barrenness, before the birth of Joseph and Benjamin.

But there is another well meeting that occurs before this (Genesis 24). Eliezer picks Rebekah as a suitable wife for Isaac, when she offers water to his camels. In both stories it is water given to animals that seals the deal. Rebekah like Rachel is barren, and like her childbirth in attendant with difficulties, and like her the children that are born shape the future of the nation.

Moses flees Egypt and finds himself in Midian at a well. Moses drives bullying shepherds away and gives water to their flocks to drink. This time there are several girls involved and only later, does Moses marry one of them – Zipporah. There is no barrenness here, but the threat of extinction through the strange story of the circumcision.

To these three key texts we must add the story of Ruth and Boaz. This later work written in patriarchal style, takes the main theme of the matriarchs – barrenness and birth – and re-works it, so that King David shares a birth story with Isaac and Jacob. It makes him part of the divine destiny where children are not easily come by, but by virtue of the difficulty are rendered special. Naomi is the barren woman in this case, and Ruth acts the role of the patriarch, leaving her homeland and meeting her husband by – not a well this time but cisterns of water.

The other reworking is the expulsion of Hagar (Genesis 21). Hagar finds herself lost and wandering in the desert. She places her son Ishmael a little way off and waits for him to die. God intervenes,

and Hagar sees a well of water, that saves her son. Thus a non-Jew too receives blessing through water.

In all these stories, it is not the marriage, but the progeny that is ultimately the goal. There has been barrenness, or the near death of children. Water gives life, it preserves life, and enables life.

The Song of Songs (4:5) talks of “A fountain of gardens, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon.”

A well of living waters ... *Mayim Chayim* refers us to the mikvah, where living waters describe a flowing water, as opposed a stagnant pool. Here a woman is expected to bathe after her period. The counting of the days from the start of menstruation to its end plus the seven ‘clean’ days ensured that the return of a wife to her husband would occur at the time of greatest fertility. Thus Mikvah is associated with childbirth.

The Mishnah (Shabbat 2:6) states that failure to attend the mikvah resulted in the woman dying in childbirth. These waters are ‘living’ because they give life and also preserve life. This significance would have been known to John, who uses the idea of *mayim chayim* for his discourse.

The waters, too, are used for conversion. Baptism is a new birth, as a child into a new life.

So, our text starts with a discussion of baptism, then Jesus moves away from the Jordan, to the well of Jacob. This is foreign territory – Samaria. Jesus does what Eliezer, Jacob and Moses did when leaving their homeland and coming to a strange land – he sits by a well and observes. A Samaritan woman comes and he asks her for a drink, but unlike Rebekah, she objects – drawing the distinction between the two nations. Here is the first departure from the classic formulation, but we have already seen God give a foreign woman water in the story of Hagar.

This Samaritan appears ignorant of the parallels, and of the significance of *mayim chayim*. “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” Her challenge to Jesus sets him up for the discourse. “Are you greater than our father Jacob?” He gave life to the place by providing the inhabitants with a well of water for their flocks to drink. What exactly is different about the water the Jesus is offering? Jesus’ water is not well water, it is mikvah water. The life being offered is that of rebirth into faith. “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

Jesus’ mention of the woman’s husbands brings us back to the issue of marriage and progeny. In spite of a plethora of husbands she does not, it seems, have children. But when she says “I know that the messiah is coming,” this would seem a non-sequitur except that the story Ruth is part of this collection of stories, and Ruth describes the birth of King David the progenitor of the Messiah. “When he comes he will explain all things to us.”

In this encounter Jesus has explained the meaning of all five stories where wells of water bring people together; moments of great significance in the development of the faith. For John this last visit to the well completes the set; from the patriarchs, through David to the emergence of the Messiah – the very last part of the story.